

Broken  
Off   
Flowers  
AND  
Blown   
Out  
Candles

LARRY DEASON

**Broken Off Flowers  
and  
Blown Out Candles**

*The Value Of A Human Being*



# PREFACE

Alarm and anguish. Torment and agony. Hurt and pain: the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual kinds. Shattered dreams and broken promises. Who doesn't know that life's traumatic experiences and tragic relationships frequently cut through the heart like a jagged knife!

Is there healing for the wounds? Is there comfort for the wounded? Is there hope for the hopeless? Is there wholeness for the broken?

The answer is, *yes!* However, it is conditioned upon an appropriate understanding of the following principles:

**Reality**—*removing the masks*

**Strength**—*rethinking power*

**Understanding**—*recovering sensitivity*

**Acceptance**—*receiving one another*

**Values**—*respecting true worth*

Are you willing to take off the masks and be real? Are you ready to reconsider the meaning of power, that you may know an invincible strength? Are you prepared to learn to be understanding, even when you don't understand? Are you humble enough to accept that which you cannot change? Are you ready to believe the tremendous

value that God bestows upon you and all other human beings?

I pray that you may find comfort and help in your brokenness. May you come to know that the God of all comfort strongly desires your wholeness. And may you come to know and appreciate more and more this great truth: that wholeness is realized through brokenness. Rest assured that there is no candle that has been blown out that He cannot light, and no flower that has been broken off that He cannot restore to life.

Larry Deason

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One inevitably owes a great debt of gratitude to many people who have assisted him along the way, regardless of the goal he may have reached. This is true in my case, in the writing of books.

In the revision of this book I cannot forget those who were there when the original manuscript was prepared: Sharon Robertson, Susan Ziomek, Keith Luker, Bill Bean, and Norma West. To these, I'm forever grateful and will always count them as co-laborers in the Lord.

As increasing requests were made, it was needful for these earlier writings to be called back into print; hence, the revision.

I am thankful that Bill Bean has continued to provide his editorial and proofreading skills. I also count myself blessed to have the skillful assistance of Dick Girard in the computer layout of this revised publication.

I am most thankful to my Lord and God, who has given me the grace to respond to the opportunity to spread the Good News of His Son Jesus Christ through the printed word.

***“He does not crush the weak or  
quench the smallest hope....”***

**IN LOVING MEMORY**

**of**

**Mother  
(1913-1990)**

**...beautifully adorned flower**

**whose last ten years were darkened and broken**

**by Alzheimer's disease**

**but**

**who now has come to know and experience**

**ultimate wholeness**

**in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.**



# **CONTENTS**

Preface.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	ix
Broken Off Flowers And Blown Out Candles.....	1
Being Real: Removing Our Masks.....	25
Being Strong: Rethinking Power.....	57
Being Understanding: Recovering Sensitivity....	91
Being Accepting: Receiving One Another.....	135



## Broken Off Flowers And Blown Out Candles

Mark Twain once remarked that, as a boy, he had considered his father somewhat foolish, although he was amazed at how much wiser the old man grew as the years went by. One suspects that it was the younger man's perception, not his father's prudence, which had most changed with the passing of time. Students of Scripture can especially identify with Twain's observation; numerous biblical passages that once seemed trivial or even nonsensical tend to become profoundly meaningful in one's later life. The concept of broken off flowers and blown out candles is a biblical gem that had eluded my grasp for many years, although it had always been within my reach. May the reader now patiently consider an extended passage from Matthew's gospel account, on the premise that good things are indeed worth waiting for:

*At that time Jesus went through the grain fields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." He answered, "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests. Or haven't you read in the Law that on the Sabbath the priests in the temple desecrate the day and yet are innocent? I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. If you*

*had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath." Going on from that place, he went into their synagogue, and a man with a shriveled hand was there. Looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, they asked him, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?" He said to them, "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" ....Many followed him, and he healed all their sick, warning them not to tell who he was. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."<sup>1</sup>*

The Pharisees had somehow become more concerned with religious technicalities than with human beings. Their system of values had become so twisted that they practiced a higher regard for animals than for people. In their preoccupation with religion, they lost sight of both God and man. It is no wonder they failed to recognize the God-Man as their Messiah. The spiritual dilemma of many people today, including some who claim to be Christians, is parallel in many respects to that of these Pharisees: They abound in religion, but they do not know God; consequently, they do not know the value of a person.

I used to care nothing for things of beauty; often, I would destroy them, just for something to do. It is easy to be

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<sup>1</sup>Matt. 12:1-12, 15-21.

thoughtless and cruel. For example, one might be walking along a path and happen to notice one flower with a bent stem. Perhaps a bird had landed upon it and the stem had given way under the weight. But careless people do not concern themselves with the causes and backgrounds of brokenness, and so they snap off the delicate blossom, and toss it aside.

When a candle wick burns down and begins to flicker and smoulder, even though it is yet able to give a little light, we almost instinctively blow it out. After all, it is no longer what it once was. It has become less than it was meant to be.

The usual response toward anything that blemishes our cosmetic-crazed culture illustrates my point: If something is flawed, bruised, bent, warped, cracked, split, broken, or shattered, what do we do with it? What usually happens to the marred, the scarred, the barely aflame, barely alive in our culture? We set these defective commodities aside, stamp "Reject" on them, and eventually discard or destroy them. Consider the yearly post-Christmas purge that fills the garbage heaps and trash cans of America: monuments to our unfriendly disposition toward the broken off flowers and the blown out candles.

### *The Challenge*

The real problem in our consumer-oriented, assembly line society is that, in this habitual disregard of things, it is too easy for us to treat people as disposable objects. We find ourselves forgetting the inherent value and potential beauty

of each individual bearer of God's image. We hear ourselves doubting and flagrantly denying that some of these human artifacts can ever again be made whole, even by the Creator Himself. Yet, if there is any created thing in the known universe valuable enough to salvage, surely it would be those who are created in the image of God, and especially those who are being re-created in Christ. "Let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers" (Gal. 6:10).

### ***The Christ***

The God who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ desires mercy. He extends rich blessings to the indefensibly guilty; surely, He will never condemn the innocent:

*At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy.<sup>2</sup>*

The lovingkindness and mercy of God revealed in Christ lift us above our our sinful past as we submit to His great salvation. He saved us "because of His mercy," and calls us to become conformed to His own heart of love.

Consider the ministry of Christ as He came in contact with people who were broken and barely aflame with life. Although one could write volumes about Jesus' encounters with such people, four examples will suffice to show His at-

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<sup>2</sup>Titus 3:3-5.

titude and response toward the broken flowers and blown out candles of humanity.

## 1. The Samaritan Woman At The Well

(John 4:1-42)

The disciples have gone into the Samaritan city of Sychar to buy food. As Jesus rests by the well of the patriarch Jacob, being weary from His journey to Galilee from Judea, there comes a Samaritan woman to draw water. This woman is not merely a character in a story; she is a person of flesh and blood, encountering Jesus Christ.

The origin of the Samaritan race is described in 2 Kings 17. The Lord had brought judgement upon Israel's idolatry and other sins by exiling to Assyria all but the lowliest people of the land. This despised remnant of Israel eventually inter-married with the pagan nations which had been carried off to Samaria by the Assyrians. The result of this was the Samaritan race and religion, a conglomeration of Jewish culture and various pagan elements. So this Samaritan woman, in the eyes of many, is a half-breed and a heretic. Her race and religious background render her unclean and untouchable, as far as most Jews were concerned. Amazingly, Jesus begins to talk with her.

It is immediately apparent to Jesus that this woman has led a troubled life. She has left a trail of broken relationships and muddled emotions behind her. Jesus challenges her to confront herself: "Go, call your husband and come back."

Although not eager to discuss the details of her personal life

with a foreigner, the woman replies to this extraordinary stranger with surprising courage and candor: "I have no husband." Jesus mercifully (even if somewhat bluntly) relieves this poor burdened woman of her last vestige of ego-defensiveness: "You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true." She is a broken woman standing there before Jesus, utterly disarmed. There is no point in continuing the charade. He knows exactly who and what she is. The masquerade has ended, since this stranger has removed her mask. She can let down her guard. Why not? This Jew has penetrated her social armor at its most vulnerable point, and yet refuses to harm her.

By this time, the disciples have returned from their business in the city. The text says they are amazed to find Jesus talking with "a woman": not just this particular woman, but any woman. The view of women current among Jews of this time is expressed in the teaching of the rabbis:

*Let no one talk with a woman in the street, no, not with his own wife.*

*Better that the words of the law should be burned than delivered to women.*

*Each time that a man prolongs conversation with a woman he causes evil to himself, and desists from the law, and in the end inherits Gehinnom.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup>William Barclay, "The Gospel of John" (Vol.1), *The Daily Study Bible Series*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), p. 162.

The disciples apparently are not yet accustomed to Jesus' defiance of religious etiquette in His dedication to doing God's will. While they know better than to tell Jesus how appalled they are at His lack of social discretion, they probably cannot refrain from expressing to one another their inward reaction to their teacher's scandalous behavior: "Why in the world is He talking with *her*?" On another occasion, two of these same disciples wanted to call down fire out of heaven to consume an entire Samaritan town that had refused to welcome Jesus because He was heading for Jerusalem. They were eager to blow out the candle, to break off the flower—and Jesus rebuked them for it.

And how many times have you and I passed judgement on somebody? How often have we said in our hearts, "This person is not redeemable; they have gone too far"? Do we not understand that the power of God's Good News about His Son can save and restore the most broken of the broken? Would Jesus not say to us what He once said to James and John?

*"You do not know what kind of spirit you are of, for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."<sup>4</sup>*

Is the object of our criticism a Christian? Let us take care, lest we call "unclean" that which God has made clean. Is he

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<sup>4</sup>Luke 9:55.

or she an unbeliever? Our condemnation is not required; one cannot condemn that which is already condemned. That which is condemned needs redemption and healing, and that is why the Father sent the Son into the world. Jesus did not come to loathe the loathsome, but to love the unlovely unconditionally. Broken people need to be loved; they are literally dying to learn what real love is. Such was the need of this woman at the well.

This woman was broken, and yet Jesus Christ took time out for her. He refused to let the ignorance of His contemporaries deter Him from making contact with her, even though His own disciples were also infected with bigotry. He spoke with her and led her into the way of righteousness. Her testimony later produced an abundant harvest of converts from her home town. One never knows; the most broken flower, the least flickering candle, can become a beacon of light and life that will guide others to the One who is the only harbor of safety for our lives.

## 2. The Woman Taken In Adultery (John 8:1-11)

On this occasion, certain insensitive and self-righteous scribes and Pharisees found what they called a “woman caught in the act of adultery.” With motives that were painfully transparent, these self-appointed deputies of divine justice brought her into the very temple of God, where Jesus was teaching. This would have seemed the perfect place in which to make their accusations: in the presence of almighty God, and at the feet of Jesus Himself. But this woman was not the true target of their malicious action; she

was but an expendable pawn in their plan to find Jesus guilty of sin.

John recalls that these religious leaders “made her stand before the group.” They put her on public display, a pathetic spectacle of shame and misery. These men, apparently devoid of human compassion or even of common consideration, intended to make Jesus choose between (1) honoring God’s law (thereby alienating the common people who heard Him gladly), and (2) recognizing Roman rule (which forbade the Jews to practice capital punishment).<sup>5</sup>

*“Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?”<sup>6</sup>*

It was an ingenious ploy, well planned and designed to confront this young rabbi with an inescapable dilemma. Jesus did not reply immediately. Instead, He stooped down and began to write on the ground with his finger. Finally, when He saw that the woman’s accusers were determined to receive His answer, He stood up and said to them:

*“If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”<sup>7</sup>*

The prosecutors began to leave the scene, one by one, and thus was the trial cancelled for lack of executioners. The woman stood alone with Jesus, face to face with the sinless Son of God, the only Man who would ever be qualified to judge and condemn her. He neither denied nor minimized

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<sup>5</sup>See John 18:31.

<sup>6</sup>John 8:4-5.

<sup>7</sup>John 8:7.

her guilt; He did something far more scandalous and shocking instead. He *forgave* her!

A broken woman had been lovingly accepted and admonished to a whole and restored life. This is the power of the Good News of God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

*"Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"  
"No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you,"  
Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." <sup>8</sup>*

God's forgiveness is unmerited. It is a "just-as-I-am" forgiveness that flows freely from the gracious heart of God to the most defiled and depraved of sinners. This is the meaning of God's "Good News":

*Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.<sup>9</sup>*

Christians too easily forget that God saved us, "not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy."<sup>10</sup> There is nothing in us that brought forth our salvation; its cause lies entirely within Him. We own no righteousness apart from that which God freely grants to us in union with Jesus, His Son. Even our response of love and faith toward God rests on the initiative of Jesus, our Savior. Our purpose in this world is to share this same merciful Savior with others who desperately need to "taste and see that the LORD is good."<sup>11</sup> But how can we best convince men and women that God has indeed opened heaven's windows and showered upon the spiritually starving world the

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<sup>8</sup>John 8:10-11.   <sup>9</sup>Rev. 22:1.

<sup>10</sup>Titus 3:5.       <sup>11</sup>Ps. 34:8.

very Bread of Life? How can we effectively carry a message of faith, hope, and love to those who have long since lost sight of faith, hope, and love?

I am convinced that the greatest method of soul winning that exists in our generation is the showing forth of the mercy of Christ. As the social and ethical implications of mechanistic evolutionary theories become increasingly clear to those who have been reared to accept these theories without question, we should expect this generation to become increasingly inhuman, uncompassionate, and violent. The opportunity is ripe for Christian mercy to stand out as an oasis of beauty and truth in a desert of ugliness and despair. I am not rejecting the various soul winning methods that Christians have researched and developed, but I must say that if our hearts are not moved by love, compassion, and mercy as we reach out to the lost and deal with fellow Christians, *we are absolutely wasting our time.*<sup>12</sup>

### 3. Bartimaeus, The Blind Beggar (Mark 10:46-52)

This incident occurred at the very height of Jesus' ministry. He had performed many undeniably miraculous signs, and had brought wholeness to many whose lives had been physically, emotionally, and spiritually broken. A great throng was following Jesus as He left Jericho on His way to Jerusalem. A blind beggar known as Bartimaeus sat by the roadside, and having heard that Jesus of Nazareth was passing by his customary post, began to scream out, "Jesus, Son

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<sup>12</sup>See 1 Cor. 13:1-3.

of David, have mercy on me!” Several in the crowd tried to silence him. A modern paraphrase of their efforts to dampen the beggar’s burning enthusiasm would likely sound like this: “Shut up, man! Can’t you see that Jesus is too busy with God’s work to bother with a nobody like you?” But, whatever the antagonists said to Bartimaeus, he didn’t listen to them. Hope had been stirred within him and all of their efforts to crush it were bound to fail. This was Bartimaeus’ golden opportunity, his big break, and he clearly recognized it as such. If it was to be “now or never,” Bartimaeus had unalterably resolved that it would be *now*: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” A plea for help couched in the language of faith could never fail to gain the attention of Jesus. The Lord heard his cry and was not too preoccupied to care. Jesus was never too busy to light a blown out candle or mend a broken flower. “Bring the flower here, bring the candle to Me.” This was the motto of His entire ministry, and still is.<sup>13</sup>

The text states that this Son of Timaeus threw off his cloak, jumped to his feet, and came to Jesus. It is probable that he ran, almost numb with the anticipation of the critical moment, bumping blindly into one onlooker after another. At last, he heard Jesus ask him the question that would change the rest of his life: “What do you want me to do for you?” It was a question that Bartimaeus could answer without a moment’s hesitation: “*I want to see.*”

If Jesus’ brief interview with Bartimaeus seems a bit too anticlimactic to modern readers, it is only because many of

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<sup>13</sup>See Matt. 11:28-30.

us know so little about the dynamics of faith. Faith that moves mountains and opens blind eyes begins with the conscious realization of our deep need, and our personal inadequacy to meet that need. Jesus' question was designed to bring Bartimaeus to a confession of faith, and Bartimaeus' reply revealed his firm conviction that only Jesus could meet his need. I am convinced that there are many blind people who would want to see, except that they have never yet *consciously realized* that they cannot see. I am talking about people who are in the dark about the meaning and purpose of life. Unless God's people stop condemning the innocent and start practicing the mercy of Christ, those who sit in great darkness may continue to hear rumors about some- thing called "light," but they will never personally see it. They will be far worse off than blind Bartimaeus; at least *he* knew what he needed, and where he should direct his cries for help.

#### 4. The Parable Of The Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)

No biblical passage has been used more to show the love and grace of God than this one. Most of us know this story of how a young man demanded his inheritance, left his father's home, and went into the "far country." In the words of the older brother in the story, he "squandered his property with prostitutes." He deliberately chose a selfish life, as he himself later confessed. When this young man got down to the bottom of his life in the far country, he took a job that would have disgusted any self-respecting Jew: he became a feeder of swine. Worse, he envied the swine for the

swill that he fed them. At that point, he made what was undoubtedly the best decision of his life: “How many of my father’s hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.”

Lately, I’ve been impressed with a new thought as I have read this text. In my mind’s eye, I follow that son as he decides to leave the far country and return home. As I watch the young man walking down the dusty Palestinian road toward his father’s house, the camera, as it were, shifts to a close-up of the father as he is working in the fields. As the father looks and sees the lonely figure coming down the road, his face reveals a mind racing with excitement: “Can it be? *Can it be?* Is this my boy?” And, surely enough, *it is!* Forgetting all the deportment of patriarchal dignity, *the father runs* to embrace his son, and the young man begins to make the confession and request that he had previously determined to make: “Father, *I have sinned* against heaven and against you. *I am no longer worthy* to be called your son.”

Freeze-frame! At this point in the action, it occurred to me that, had this son been of an insincere heart, he could have said, “Why, look at this—the old man’s running! He seems eager to see me. Perhaps I won’t even have to say what I thought about saying to him while I was starving in the far country. Maybe he’ll just let me come right back in here

and resume my rightful place in the house without my having to humble myself.” But instead, the genuineness of this broken flower is seen. As the scene continues to unfold, it becomes clear that the sinfulness and unworthiness of the son are not the determining factors in the father’s disposition toward him; they do not begin to explain the running father, his passionate embrace, or his fervent kisses. The source of these things is to be found in the father’s heart, and not his son’s. This is emphasized by the manner in which the father makes no direct response to the son, apparently interrupting him before he can make his intended request. Instead of speaking to the son, the father turns to his servants:

*“Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”<sup>14</sup>*

As important and profound as were the words of this father, equally impressive to me was what he did *not* say. Some fathers would have said “That’s right, son; you’re not worthy. Go to your room and stay there until your mother and I can sort this out and decide what we should do about the way you treated us when you left home. You really should be ashamed of yourself. Get down and grovel some more.” But this father didn’t say anything like that. It was as though the boy hadn’t even admitted his unworthiness. “Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate.” What kind of response is this to self-con-

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<sup>14</sup>Luke 15:22-23.

fessed guilt? How does God view the broken? How does He respond to a blown out candle? *Light* the candle; *mend* the flower! God does. Jesus does. And He calls you and me to do the same.

### ***The Commitment***

People are blowing out countless candles and breaking off entire bouquets of flowers, but even one would be too many. Many theological conclusions might be drawn from the depth of Jesus' teachings and example; it is obvious that I have not exhausted the concept of "broken off flowers and blown out candles," because it is so profound. It is the very essence of the heart of God. My only intentions have been to introduce the subject for the reader's consideration, to reveal something of its width and depth, and to give disciples of Jesus a basis for further biblical exploration and practical application of the mind of Christ. As one sensitive individual has said, "It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness." But of someone far greater, it is written:

*He will not break the stem of a plant that has been bent. He will not even put out the flame of a wick that is barely burning. He will not break the reed that is already bent, and He will not extinguish the light that has almost stopped shining.<sup>15</sup>*

How do we "break flowers" and "blow out candles" today? One way to find out would be to discover where our own

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<sup>15</sup>Isa. 42:1-4; compare Matt. 12:17-21 (paraphrase, L. Deason.)

attitudes and actions toward others differ from Christ's:

*He does not fight nor shout; He does not raise His voice. He does not crush the weak, or quench the smallest hope.*<sup>16</sup>

We break human flowers and blow out candles made of flesh and blood when we are *thoughtless, inconsiderate, unkind*, and *abusive* toward other people. We live in the midst of a violent generation that is lashing out and beating its own children to death. Throughout this affluent society, we have welfare services dealing with the battered child syndrome, the battered wife epidemic, the battered husband phenomenon. *Everybody seems to be beating on each other*, and especially within the family unit. We shrink back in horror at the news stories of those who batter their infants against a wall or sexually exploit helpless children. We are filled with outrage and disgust when we see the pictures of innocent children who have been "disciplined" with burning cigarettes, and many of us (thank God) can still become quite upset about the daily butchering of unborn human beings which our culture has sanctioned in the interests of our personal freedoms and economic well-being.

But let me propose a question to you, especially to you who are brothers and sisters in Jesus: How do you suppose we would react if, every time we used our God-given tongues to speak in unkind ways to one another, a bruise would appear on the skin of the one about whom we spoke? What if a mark or a scar would appear on the body of another person every time we used our tongues as instruments

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<sup>16</sup>Matt. 12:19-20, *The Living Bible*.

of gossip and slander? Do you think that this might help us to consider a little more kindness, a little more mercy, that we might not condemn the innocent?

In Romans 14 (a chapter we must surely retrieve from mothballs, if we are serious about the Christianity of the New Testament), Paul is essentially asking, “Will we destroy the work of God, the brother for whom Christ died, by judging and condemning the justified? Will we tear down a brother with our accusations and criticisms, even though God is able to make him stand? Will we break off the flowers that God has planted? Will we blow out candles which Christ Himself has lighted?”

If we are going to truly follow Jesus, if we would be His genuine disciples, we must lay aside our insecurity and selfishness. God can surely take care of His kingdom and fulfill His purpose in spite of human weakness and fallibility. As we sow the seed of the kingdom of God, as we reach out to love, share, mend, and heal—let us not crush the weak! Let us resolve that we will not discard the broken and the bruised, that we will not snuff out the smallest flickering hope, that we will not despise even the mustard seed of faith that may be there. Rather, let us see all people through the eyes of Christ, recognizing that each of us stands before God in need of mercy, compassion, help, and service. Above all, may God deliver us from an attitude of Phari-saïc-type hypocrisy: of merely *talking* about these things, but never getting around to the *doing* of that which should naturally flow out of that which we have genuinely *become*. It is not enough for us to grit our teeth and grind out deeds of “mercy”; we must first see people as God sees them, and

then treat them as Jesus would treat them.

A short story will help us to grasp the beauty of a loving attitude in dealing with the unlovely: The father of a certain almost-grown boy had reached the end of his patience with his rebellious and arrogant son. Night after night, this son would come home drunk, staggering around the house and abusing his parents with language that would pierce their hearts. The father finally washed his hands of the whole matter, but the mother's love continued.

The boy came home one night, reeling with alcohol again, shouting his usual obscenities. Having concluded his drunken tirade, he stumbled off to his room and fell across the bed into his private oblivion. His mother went in to check on him. When she didn't return, her husband went to see what was keeping her. There she was, sitting on the bed with this big boy up in her lap, with both arms around him, rocking him back and forth as if he were a baby. The father stared disbelievingly at this spectacle: "How can you do that, after all he's said about you and done to you? *How can you do this!*" The father was beside himself, trying to comprehend his wife's behavior. Her response was, "This is the only time he'll let me love him"—*and she loved him!* This mother refused to break off the flower; she would not give in and blow out the candle, for the boy was her own flesh and blood. She loved him as she loved herself. And do we not understand that when we give up on humanity—any part of it—we are really giving up on ourselves? Our human nature does not differ from that of any other human being; we are all of one kind.

## *The Conclusion*

How fragile is human life? I'm told of a certain type of orchid that takes from five to seven years to mature, and even after this time of tender care and nourishment by the gardener's hands, only one flower is produced each year. Is it possible that greenhouse keepers are more tenderly concerned about an orchid than we are about the delicate flowers which God has created in His own image, and the flickering candles that He has lighted with the gospel of His Son?

I promise before God that, to the best of my ability, I will not break off any bent flowers or blow out any flickering candles.

If *any* commitment or determination in our lives could be called "right," then it is *right* that we surrender to the heart of God in reality, in every relationship of our lives, in response to His great love for us.

Because of His tender mercies, resolve today to light each smouldering candle you see, and mend all the broken flowers along the way.

## Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

2 Kings .....	7
<b>Ps. 34:8</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Isa. 42:1-4</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Matt. 11:28-30 .....	14
<b>12:1-12</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>12:15-21</b> .....	<b>4</b>
12:17-21 .....	18
<b>12:19-20</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Mark 10:46-52 .....	13
<b>Luke 9:55</b> .....	<b>9</b>
15:11-32 .....	15
<b>15:22-23</b> .....	<b>17</b>
John 4:1-42 .....	7
8:1-11 .....	10
<b>8:4-5</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>8:7</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>8:10-11</b> .....	<b>12</b>
18:31 .....	11
Rom. 14 .....	20
1 Cor. 13:1-3 .....	13
<b>Gal. 6:10</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>Titus 3:3-5</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>3:5</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Rev. 22:17</b> .....	<b>12</b>

***“Real people  
have an awareness  
of and a hold on reality  
because they  
are not preoccupied  
with masks.  
They can see  
clearly.”***

# **Being Real**

*Removing Our Masks*



## BEING REAL

### *To Be Or Not To Be*

Out of the West comes a masked man riding upon a white horse with a hearty, “Hi-yo Silver...” *The Lone Ranger!*—I loved that show. My pulse raced to the background music: *The William Tell Overture*. It was the story of the masked man, enforcing the law and defending justice with his faithful Indian comrade, Tonto. I especially liked the closing theme. You would see someone pick up the conspicuously laid silver bullet, curiously exclaiming, “A silver bullet!...Who was that masked man?” I thought about this masked man as I contemplated *realness*. He was concealing his identity to uphold justice as one of the rangers of the old West. But true identity is often masked for various other reasons.

The masking of oneself can become a serious source of distress in one’s life. In fact, it contributes to most of our problems. We conceal our true identity and mask what we really are, whether good or bad. We hesitate to reveal our true selves for fear of what others might think of us. If we are going to have good, solid relationships with God and others, we have to take off the masks! We have to come to grips with realness. We have to become authentic.

*Real People* was another very popular television show that

became a great success. People were found who were willing to be themselves. This program had an appeal; it had something that attracted people, and that “something” was *reality*. There is a certain magnetism in realness.

Jesus Christ was real! No pretense—He was *Himself*: “I Am Who I Am.” No one ever found Him to be a counterfeit in any way. As He lived and taught the truth, people were drawn to Him. And He calls us to be real. He is our perfect example. By looking to Jesus and following Him as our model of realness, we can take off our masks and eliminate the myriad of problems unrealness causes in our lives. Jesus’ conversation with Pilate gives us helpful insight:

*“My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place.”*

*“You are a king, then!” said Pilate.*

*Jesus answered, “You are right in saying I am a king. In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to **the truth**. Everyone on the side of the truth listens to me.”*

*“What is truth?” Pilate asked.<sup>1</sup>*

Truth was personified before Pilate’s very eyes! But he did not wait for an answer from Jesus. He was satisfied with his assumption that Christ was not a king. So he turned and walked away from the answer that only Jesus can give.

This question (what is truth?) had been a source of great

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<sup>1</sup> John 18:36-38.

disturbance and controversy to the schools of the Greeks and philosophers throughout the ages. Jesus would have given Pilate the answer had he not turned away. Thousands ask the same question, but are unwilling to investigate the Word of Truth, the Bible, for the answer; they, like Pilate, walk away in their self-willed ignorance and sins.

Simply stated, Jesus is the embodiment of truth. He is “truth” in its purest form. The word *truth*, translated from the Greek, means “real, genuine, authentic.” The apostle John states:

*I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.<sup>2</sup>*

The apostle is warning of those who would lead us astray and seduce us from the truth which is real.

When it comes to antiques or monetary things, we desire the authentic. We do not want counterfeit articles. We demand the *real thing!* If we buy an object of art, we expect it to be the genuine article. If we find that it is a duplication of the real, we are troubled. Isn't it amazing how displeased we can become over the phoniness of material things—yet, when it comes down to the unrealness of our own persons, we seem not to mind? Our dishonesty with ourselves doesn't even deserve a second thought. All of our relationships suffer when we live deceptive and pretentious lives.

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<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:26-27.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus is seen talking with a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well. She repeatedly tries to distract Him from her deepest need: *the revealing of her real self*. However, Jesus quickly unmask her. She then perceives that He must be a prophet; with further exchange she comes to believe He must be the Christ. Jesus' comments to this Samaritan woman give us great understanding of God's thinking regarding *being real*:

*"Yet a time is coming and has now come when the authentic worshipers will worship the Father in a genuine spiritual attitude without the pretentious wearing of masks, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in genuineness of heart and in realness."<sup>3</sup>*

Jesus is not concerned with the old forms of worship, such as ritual and place; He gives special emphasis to the *quality* of worship—*authenticity, realness, and genuineness*. God is not impressed by those who praise Him in a phony, pretentious, or hypocritical way. He seeks *real* people, *genuine* people, to worship him. The Father looks for those who worship Him in a spiritual way—not merely in an outward, ritualistic way. He desires worship that emerges from the heart, not that which comes merely from the lips, as that of mask-wearers!

### ***The Confusion Of The Unreal***

Masks are worn for every occasion. Masquerading can

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<sup>3</sup> John 4:23-24 (paraphrase, L. Deason).

cause our lives to deteriorate, many times even to the point of developing abnormal behavior. The problem in refusing to be real is this: *we lose sight of what is real and what is unreal*. When life is not faced realistically, confusion follows.

As painful as it may be—and it will be painful—we must face ourselves *as we really are*. Take off the masks! For how else can we begin to deal with the real and sometimes threatening actualities that exist: withdrawal, frustration, depression, and suicidal tendencies?

Individual lives may become so entangled in the web of unrealness that they may need psychiatric assistance, as well as ongoing spiritual guidance, to learn to acknowledge their true feelings and face their real selves. Relationships become so torn and distorted that people need involved and arduous help in learning to become open, honest, and real with others.

Wearing masks begins in childhood. Many parents do not want to know the truth about their children's real feelings. They have a standard of social behavior that *they* want to believe about them. As a result, the children sometimes feel forced to put on a mask in order to be accepted. This way of hiding from reality is reinforced as the child continues to mature. Are the rising suicide fatalities among our young linked, in some way, to this?

We must learn to be sensitive to troubled people in the same way that Jesus was. He took the time to *see* the real and true person, and the problems that existed in the vulnerable and wounded, with a loving and giving response.

## ***Ending The Masquerade***

No matter what we are, we are human, which means that we are going to possess some good and bad traits. We are going to manifest some strengths and weaknesses; we will have some pluses and minuses. But if we will not take off our masks, we cannot grow in overcoming our areas of weakness.

Who really wants to be phony or an imitation? Why do we, so often, insist on being unreal? We have a mask for any situation that might arise—all kinds of masks! We must remove the masks in order to be real.

We must *devote* ourselves to being real, if we are going to have healthy, open, and full relationships with God, ourselves, and others. We must own up to what we truly are. This will involve the *painful* experience of peeling off our masks. We've been hiding behind them for most of our lives, so self-disclosure will be very difficult to accomplish.

Are we human beings perfect, to the point of making no mistakes? No, but we would never admit it by the way that we present ourselves. We never say we are perfect; we just pretend that we are! We put on the "I am perfect" mask, but deep down inside we know the truth. As a result, we live fragmented lives, and wonder what is wrong.

One may be great, prestigious, wealthy, powerful, popular, and dignified in the eyes of men. He may be intelligent,

wise, world renowned, and magnificent, not only in his own eyes, but in the eyes of many. But do all these things make him *real*?

Some of the most unreal people are those who are multifaceted, famous, and popular. The old expression, All that glitters is not gold, is a true statement. We are pretty good at “glittering.” But remember, it may not be gold, it may not be the real thing—not genuine! These people appear to be happy and satisfied, but are they? They have an *image* to protect. They formulate the image in their minds, imagining what they would like others to think of them. Consequently, these self-portraits are not their real selves. They ultimately lead distorted and frustrated lives. By not being real, one will suffer many painful consequences.

Years ago George Benson recorded a song called *The Masquerade*. One’s entire life can be a masquerade. Those who wear masks will never know the confidence and fullness they could experience by being sincerely themselves.

### ***The True Jesus Versus The Masked Hypocrites***

We *must* take to heart the reality of living that Jesus Christ teaches us. The greatest need for followers of Jesus is this: to not be hypocrites, but to be genuine, to be real. Hypocrites don’t wear buttons that say, “I am a hypocrite.” It is not something one deliberately broadcasts. We shield our phoniness, we keep it deep down inside. But sooner or later, it comes to the surface!

As God's people, we come together and learn of Jesus' love and the qualities of His being. Many times, we mechanically fellowship with other Christians—going through the motions, instead of truly showing His love and His characteristics. Then we leave one another and go home, treating our families with a lack of love and Christlikeness. In other words, for the outside world we have put on a mask! But remember, hypocrisy exposes itself. This is a grim state of affairs for anyone claiming to follow Jesus. But this wayward person can find help.

Another great concern to be aware of and caution ourselves against is a *casual indifference* to the realness to which Jesus calls us. Christianity is more than just “going to church”; it is more than “praying prayers.” It is much more than doing, doing, doing. A rocking horse has a lot of motion when you are rocking on it, but it doesn't go anywhere! We must come to terms with *being*, and then doing will naturally follow. Christlike actions will follow out of love, if we are genuinely seeking to be real in our relationship to Jesus.

There is an intense need to have a strong grasp on, and an appreciation for, realness in an *earnest* way, as Jesus did. He constantly lived and taught authenticity and purity of heart. He challenged people to own up to their pretenses. Wherever He went, He could see the mask. He sees our masks, too, and He says to all, “Take off that mask! I will help you.” He helps us to know ourselves, recognize realness, and live the truth. Jesus reveals to us what we really are—as well as what we aren't. He shows us what we truly can become: honest with life, others, ourselves, and espe-

cially with God. He recognizes phoniness and uncovers it; He acknowledges the real and encourages it.

### *Jesus Encounters The Real*

We can learn about being real from several characters in the New Testament. They came into the life of Jesus and expressed authenticity. They had their flaws, but they *wanted* to be real. They were willing to admit to whatever they were.

#### *To Be Lowly Or Highminded*

Consider John the Baptizer.<sup>4</sup> Three things come quickly to mind concerning the quality of his life. First, he was *open* to God's will; second, he was *obedient* to God's command; and third, he was *humble* before the Lord.

Like this man, we need a spirit of humility. It is necessary to acknowledge the greatness of God, and stop pretending to be greater than He. Earl Jabay's book, *The God Players*, discusses ways of looking at God's role in our lives. In subtle ways, even Christians fall prey to the "playing God" syndrome. Often, we believe and behave as though *everything* depends upon us. How untrue! If everything were contingent upon us, how long do you think we would survive? Let's face the truth, the reality—*God* is great and *everything* hinges upon Him! This acknowledgment should bring us to our knees and give us the humility of heart that John had.

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<sup>4</sup>See Mark 1:4-8.

A further look into the personality of this prophet who prepared the way for Christ shows us that he “wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”<sup>5</sup> He did not care about maintaining a reputation with the main stream, in order to be accepted. Rather, he remained true to himself. He didn’t disguise himself to be favored by others.

We need to understand that realness implies the *uniqueness* and *significance* of the individual. We must not reject people because they don’t fit our mold of what we think they should be.

### *To Be Receptive Or Non-Receptive*

Reflect upon the “real” characters that are seen in the parable of the four different types of soil.<sup>6</sup> Some seed was sown on good soil, representing those who are real, open. As a result they live true lives. Open people, “like seed sown on good soil, *hear* the word, *accept* it, and *produce* a crop....”<sup>7</sup> Because of their receptivity, they live productive lives that exude realness. They don’t wear masks!

The soil called “good” was *actually* good. It wasn’t pretending to be good; it wasn’t merely presenting itself as something favorable which it later did not prove to be. It *was* good!

But how are we to know that certain soil is good unless we actually sow the seed there? We must not be soil examiners!

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<sup>5</sup>Mark 1:6.    <sup>6</sup> Read Mark 4:3-20.    <sup>7</sup> Mark 4:20.

This false concept is a violation of the teaching. The seed was thrown *everywhere*, without a judgmental attitude. I abhor the discriminating disposition of those who prejudge whether or not a certain heart will receive the gospel, don't you? Who, but God, can rightfully judge whether or not a human heart *will* be open or *when* it will be receptive?

In order for a person to accept the gospel, he must take off the mask, and see and accept himself as a sinner. This requires being real. And as we know, it can be very difficult and may take some time. It takes patience and understanding on the sower's part. We must not give up on people because of their first reaction. Instead, we must nurture the soil, and wait upon the Lord to do His work!

### *To Be Courageous Or Cowardly*

Another "real" person in the Scriptures is the woman who was subject to a bleeding disease for twelve years.<sup>8</sup> She spent all of her money on doctors, searching for a cure. It looked hopeless; then Jesus came. She pushed through the crowd around Him and touched His clothing, believing she would be healed. Her bleeding stopped. Jesus questioned immediately:

*"Who touched my clothes?" ... Then the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came and fell at his feet and, trembling with fear, told him the whole truth.<sup>9</sup>*

She hid at first. Then she courageously removed her mask and revealed herself to Jesus. That took being real. Al-

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<sup>8</sup>See Mark 5:25-34.

<sup>9</sup>Mark 5:30,33.

though she had spent many years seeking healing from many physicians, she held hope in her heart. She did not close out new possibilities. She was *open*—a fundamental disposition of heart that characterizes realness. In fact, she believed and expected to be helped. Jesus told her: “...your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.”<sup>10</sup> Openness and realness frees us not only from bodily suffering, but also from inner misery. Be real! God will bless your open-heartedness more than you can imagine.

### *To Be Persistent Or Passive*

As Jesus was leaving the city of Jericho, a blind man, begging on the side of the road, called out to Him:

*“Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Many rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he shouted all the more....<sup>11</sup>*

In spite of their intimidating remarks, this man did not withdraw. He was not concerned about what people thought. He was himself: real.

Blind Bartimaeus was humble before the people and lowly before the Lord. He was persistent in crying out, “Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, have mercy on me!” Jesus heard his cries and called him to come. Those who had tried to quiet him now helped him! Isn’t that so like people who wear masks? But Bartimaeus wasn’t wearing one. He was honest and refused to be embarrassed. And he didn’t give up.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mark 5:34.

<sup>11</sup>Mark 10:47-48.

<sup>12</sup>Read Luke 18:35-43.

I believe tribulations and misfortunes that come to us in life can cause us to be the real people we need to be. If trouble and tragedy bring us to the point of humility, enabling us to become real, then let them come!

### *To Be Aware Or Unaware*

An open and unashamed person was Mary of Bethany. She, like the others, was meek and humble: real before the Lord. She got down on her hands and knees, and with an expensive perfume, anointed Jesus' feet and then wiped them with her hair. Here is genuineness, authenticity—no phoni-ness.

It is recorded that she poured the perfume both on his head and feet. To anoint the head was common, but to anoint the feet showed a true mark of humility and love. Mary wasn't frightened into hiding her feelings for the Lord; she openly expressed them. This is, without question, *realness*.

When others who were present objected to her wasting the expensive perfume in this manner (for they thought it should have been used for the poor), Jesus responded:

*"Leave her alone.... Why are you bothering her?... The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial."*<sup>13</sup>

Mary was *perceptive*. Real people have an awareness of, and a hold on, reality because they are not preoccupied with

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<sup>13</sup> Mark 14:6-8.

masks. They can see clearly. They are not leading distorted lives and, consequently, can readily assimilate truth.

The main characteristics of the Good Soil, the Woman with the bleeding disease, John, Bartimaeus, and Mary can be concisely summarized as follows: *they were what they were*. Can we appreciate this simple fact? I have found that this non-complex description of realness is too simple for many to receive. But, think about it: who is a real person? A real person is a person *as he is*. Why must we try to be something that we aren't? Think long and hard about this, and absorb what has been learned thus far from these real people who were touched by Jesus' life.

### ***Some Of The Many Masks We Wear***

First, there is the “tough guy” mask. One day, I was driving my car (approximate weight: five thousand pounds) into my subdivision at a slow speed. As I approached the street where I lived, I noticed a neighborhood boy, age five, (approximate weight: fifty-five pounds) jumping out into the middle of the street. He was in a “tough guy” stance. He was probably pretending to be one of those fictitious, incredibly super-strong television personalities. There he was—something *other* than himself!

I said to myself, “I am going to test this little fellow.” I wasn't endangering his life, I would never do that, but I just kept driving at the same speed. *Reality* came crashing in on him quite quickly as I got closer and closer. He jumped back on the curb, long before I got to him. We learn to be

pretenders at a very early age, but fortunately, at any age, the “pressures of life” can bring us to our knees before tragedy occurs.

Every generation of young people wears the “I am tough” mask. Back in the fifties I used to wear a “tough, I am cool” mask (two masks in one!). You had to muster up a lot of “something you didn’t have” to present this facade. You had to look “cool” and act like you really were tough. But behind the mask, you knew you weren’t. You would hope and pray that no one would pull off that mask.

I will never forget how real I became one day when one of my peers in school, wearing his “I am tougher than you” mask, drew a knife on me. Suddenly, I became very honest! Reality shook my phony self-image upon seeing that long, shiny blade— “Okay, okay, I was just kidding; I’m not tough. Here, see? I’m shaking.” I tore off the mask without delay! Why do we have to wait until our lives are endangered before we become real?

Another camouflage is the “I know all things” mask. Preachers, elders, and teachers sometimes wear this mask. I was acquainted with a preacher who received a request from some young students to study the book of Revelation. To their expressed desire he responded, “You are not ready for that yet.” How did he know they weren’t ready for it? They were certainly interested in understanding it. Who was he to make that judgement on their intelligence? I suspected (I didn’t really know) that *he* wasn’t ready to teach it, and he didn’t want to reveal that!

We should have the attitude that we don’t know *all* things,

because we actually don't. Be honest. Be genuine. You won't be scorned for admitting you're not cognizant of all knowledge; rather, you will be respected for being real.

When I lived in New Zealand, I was having an in-depth conversation with a gentleman who had been a stockbroker on Wall Street in New York City. He was very successful, but had become disenchanted with life and was shattered over a broken relationship. He had a pack on his back and was traveling around the world. As he came through where we lived, he spent the night with us.

As we were seated on the front steps of our house, gazing at a beautiful sunset, our overnight guest presented many philosophical speculations and questions about life. I would give answers from the Word of the Lord. He would question things concerning the origin of life, the world, living, and dying; and I would respond from the principles of Truth in God's Word.

Our dialogue had gone on for some time when, in a friendly way, he asked, "Is there *anything* you don't know?" I replied, "Well, yes, but we just haven't discussed it yet." That was true. I know some things; and the things I know, I know. But what I don't know, I have learned to admit. One cannot *continue* to grow in "grace and knowledge" as long as he is under the delusion that he already "knows it all"!

The sciences have a real struggle with knowledge. Human beings will never have the capability of knowing all that belongs only to God. We need to see and accept this fact and live accordingly. We cannot be omniscient; only God is. So go on, throw off that old "I know it all" mask.

Many people have become conditioned to wearing the “I’m just fine” mask. We put on a smile when we are greeted, and when we are asked how we are, we usually respond with the words “I’m fine” or “I’m OK”—regardless of what the true situation may be.

A young lady came to the church assembly one evening, *appearing* to be “alright.” When someone asked, “How are you doing tonight?”—she answered, “Just fine.” Several nights later she committed suicide. Was she really “just fine”? No—she obviously was masking an enormous amount of pain, frustration, and confusion.

A young man came to a Bible study, discussed the Scriptures, and *seemed* happy and joyful in the Lord. Before the next Bible study, which he always attended, he killed himself. Was “everything fine”?

Many are afraid to show their *real* feelings, even in the body of Christ. They are not only afraid to reveal themselves for their own fear of what others may think of them, but they also may have real reason to hide.

Most people don’t know how to react to open expression of emotional pain. It is not what they *expect* to hear or see. How many times have we seen someone crying, and instead of showing our concern and approaching that person, we turn away in fear or embarrassment, not knowing how to relate to this kind of transparency and candidness—this realness?

This is a problem to which we should give more attention.

We must become open to seeing what really *is*, and not be afraid to lovingly respond. Sometimes, all that hurting people need is someone to genuinely listen to them. Aren't we, as Christians who are filled with the love of Christ, capable of doing that? We may not understand the situation, but we can be understanding and caring. This will make a big difference in the way people open themselves up, knowing they won't be rejected or despised for being themselves, whoever they may be.

Consider yet another disguise: the "holier than thou" mask. No doubt, the Lord is painfully displeased with one who wears this mask. This person puts on a pious, snobbish air and looks down upon his fellow human beings. This is especially distressing when it happens among those who are related to each other by the blood of the Lamb.

These mask-wearers, like the legalistic Pharisees, "put on a show," but in everyday life, they don't serve and worship the Lord from the heart. Observe how strongly the Lord rebukes those who wear this mask:

*"You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain....'"*<sup>14</sup>

Because they were only putting on a display, their worship was *in vain!* It counted as nothing before the Lord. We need to face up to our real selves, sin and all, seeing ourselves as we *truly are*. God sees through the "holier than thou" mask; we cannot hide from Him. This is a problem of the heart,

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<sup>14</sup> Matt. 15:7-9.

making it a most difficult mask to remove; but it can be done, if we truly want to please the Lord.

Finally, there is the “I’ve got it all together” mask. This is an arrogant false face! It is indicative of the lie that “I can do all things” in and of myself. Behind this mask, people are about to break; physically and emotionally they are wrecks. These people push, push, push, to the point of exhaustion. Yes, we can do all things, but only *with Christ*.

This, too, may be a difficult lesson to learn; we resist stepping aside to give our whole selves up to Jesus and his power. But when we do, we can withstand any inward or outward pressure that life inflicts on us.

“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”<sup>15</sup> This passage does *not* teach, “I can do all things, at one time, all the time.” Many believe they can do this, and they experience “burn out.” They stress themselves to the maximum, and can’t go on, believing themselves to be failures. But the problem is clear: they are hiding behind the belief that they “have it *all* together.” We need to follow more closely the example of Jesus. He often went aside and rested. This is something all of us need to do: pace ourselves, practice an honest balance.

A woman entered a second-hand store and bought an inexpensive, old painting for the frame. When she got it home, she and her husband began examining the canvas before removing it from the frame. They noticed that there was an-

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<sup>15</sup> Phil. 4:13.

other painting underneath the surface. They had it appraised by an expert and it was revealed that the painting hidden underneath was worth forty or fifty thousand dollars!

The authentic was camouflaged. This is where realness is, this is where beauty is, and this is where value is: *underneath* the facade. We must shed all those masks we wear in order to honestly give our hearts and our true selves to God and others. This is crucial in becoming real—like Christ.

### ***The Tendency To Hide***

The primary cause of wearing a mask is seen in the historical account of mankind's first pair.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden, they listened to the lies of the Devil. Satan's statement to them, "You surely shall not die," was an out-and-out denial of God's words! They chose to disobey the *truth* of God and acted according to the *lie* of Satan.

They were no longer living in agreement with the truth, but began *hiding* behind a lie. Their dishonesty with themselves caused the breakdown of a true and honest relationship with God and each other. They began to wear masks.

*Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD....<sup>16</sup>*

Sin (dishonesty, obeying a lie) causes separation and alienation. It causes people to hide from one another and from

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<sup>16</sup> Gen. 3:8.

God. Consequently, we become superficial human beings. The real person is disguised.

But the true God continues to reach out to man in spite of his living a lie. God called out to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" And Adam replied, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."<sup>17</sup>

He told a half-truth: the truth of the matter was that he was hiding, mainly because he had disobeyed the Lord and was ashamed. He was no longer an authentic human being. He did not openly communicate with God.<sup>18</sup> He tried to hide the truth of his selfishness. He could no longer be looked upon as being honest, as being real.

A separation has taken place in man's relationship with God, which causes a dishonesty in his relationship with *himself*. He no longer faces up to *his own* true being; therefore, how can he be honest with *others*?

To overcome this built-in dishonesty with oneself and others, one must search for the truth. Seeking the truth concerning oneself is both painful and humbling. For the most part, man likes to hide behind self-control and self-sufficiency. These are hard barriers to break down in becoming real with oneself, God, and others.

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<sup>17</sup> Gen. 3:10.

<sup>18</sup> J. Grant Howard, *The Trauma of Transparency* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1979), 25-30.

## ***Selfishness—The Root Of Perfectionism***

Selfish pride is usually the root of our tendency toward hiding our real selves. We want to be perfect (for our own sake); but deep down inside we know we are not. So we continue to wear the mask. We hide, or worse, deny our weaknesses and imperfections. We should rethink the concept of perfection. We should only seek to be perfect with *God's power*, for *His glory*, not merely for our own personal achievement.

Selfish pride spills over into our expectations of others. We desire perfection in those around us. We don't accept people for their real selves, weakness and all. We become scrutinizing, ruthless judges, rather than (like Jesus) loving and accepting of others, in spite of their imperfections.

We all miss the mark at times, no matter how hard we try. The sooner we see the truth of this in ourselves, the sooner we can become like Jesus—understanding, less demanding, and most of all, *real*. Then we will help one another grow in Christ. We will build each other up on a consistent basis. This is what we are commanded to do.<sup>19</sup> And we can, if we take off the mask and admit that we need help. We are not *self-sufficient*; we need Jesus to live a true and faithful life.

## ***Becoming Real Before God***

God is truth and we must look to Him in becoming real. We cannot hide from Him; therefore we must acknowledge that all we are is exposed before Him. It is a desired relationship

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<sup>19</sup> Read Eph. 4:29.

with God that will cause us to take on the predominant quality of Jesus' life: realness.

When we read the Scriptures and respond in sincerity and truth, learning Jesus' ways, we are then developing an *open* relationship with the Lord. Another way we can establish real communication with God is to pray earnestly and constantly. Our entire lives should be a prayer before the Lord. Everything we think, say, and do should be offered up to Him in praise!<sup>20</sup>

We should also recognize the fact that God uses others to communicate with us in His providential care. If we acknowledge this, we can then develop open relationships with others, if we *truly want* to be real before God. We must *desire* authenticity, without pretense, in our relationships, in order to be able to take off the masks and receive God's guidance through others.

### ***Becoming Real With Ourselves***

How do we learn to be honest with ourselves? We must accept and change the attitudes of heart and the roots of our thinking that cause us to be self-deceptive.

We often veil our true selves with the habit of rationalization: we attempt to justify our selfish behavior. We also use the process of projection: we see our faults in others, not ourselves. There is another powerful way of being unreal

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<sup>20</sup> See Heb. 13:15.

with ourselves—repression.

We deny unpleasant realities. We are protecting our ego. We are not being truthful with ourselves.<sup>21</sup>

There is a solution to this problem that comes from the Spirit of God. We must listen to Him through His Word:

*For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account.*<sup>22</sup>

The divine Word is alive to us. It is convicting, it searches for a genuineness of heart, and it discloses the real self. The searching light of God's Word discerns the motives and secret thoughts and feelings of our being.

We are not left on our own to become real with ourselves. Jesus will help us become real.

*For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.*<sup>23</sup>

Jesus was tempted in three areas: self, others, and God. We surely can identify with Him. Jesus set the perfect example for us to follow. He was triumphant over these temptations of the inner-self and remained honest and real!

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<sup>21</sup> Howard, *Trauma*, 14.    <sup>22</sup> Heb. 4:12-13.    <sup>23</sup> Heb. 4:15.

## ***Becoming Real With Others***

If we have become real with the Lord as well as ourselves, we can then become real and honest in our communication with others. If we have realized that God is the one Being from whom we cannot hide, we then will let Him teach us to be real with ourselves. As mentioned before, the root of our dishonesty with the Lord, ourselves, and others is selfish pride. Thus, if we recognize this arrogance in ourselves, we can then have a change of heart and become real people.

As real people we can honestly communicate with others. But this will take time and effort on our part. We live in a world that is too busy. We sometimes, as a result, become superficial. It's easier; it doesn't take as much time.

*We need to take time for others*, as Jesus did. His entire life was devoted to others!

The first century believers “devoted themselves to fellowship.” They did this on a daily basis, not just one or two days a week for an hour or so. *We need to recapture that devotion to fellowship and togetherness.*

These early believers helped one another at all costs. *We need to stop and see others where they are*, not only physically, but mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Then we must not shrink back behind a mask, but, rather, openly communicate with them and help them.

*We must see the value and worth in others.* Herein is the motivation that will help us become willing, honest “other-people-persons.” If we have taken off our own masks, we

should care enough to help others become free, and lovingly assist them in taking off theirs. Jesus did. We can too, if we take the time, and see the value in God, ourselves, and others.

Be real. Throw away the masks! Then, you'll become unchained: liberated from living behind a false front.

*"...if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."*<sup>24</sup>

When we follow Jesus and the truth of His teachings, we will no longer be enslaved to the sin of pride (either directly or indirectly), which causes us to be unreal.

If we will dedicate ourselves to following Jesus' likeness in life, then we "will know the truth, and the *truth* will set [us] free."<sup>25</sup> Most assuredly, we will be free from hiding; we'll stand unveiled, cast off all falsehood, express our true persons—and we *will* become real!

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<sup>24</sup> John 8:36. <sup>25</sup> John 8:32.

### ***Postscript***

I cannot put my pen down without encouraging you just one more time: Take off all those masks and throw them away! You don't really *need* them, do you?

## Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

<b>Gen. 3:8</b> .....	46
<b>Gen. 3:10</b> .....	47
<b>Matt. 15:7-9</b> .....	44
Mk. 1:4-8 .....	35
<b>Mk. 1:6</b> .....	36
Mk. 4:3-20 .....	36
<b>Mk. 4:20</b> .....	36
Mk. 5:25-34 .....	37
<b>Mk. 5:30,33</b> .....	37
<b>Mk. 5:34</b> .....	38
<b>Mk. 10:47-48</b> .....	38
<b>Mk. 14:6-8</b> .....	39
Luke 18:35-43 .....	38
<b>John 4:23-24</b> .....	30
<b>John 8:32</b> .....	52
<b>John 8:36</b> .....	52
<b>John 18:36-38</b> .....	28
Eph. 4:29 .....	48
<b>Phil. 4:13</b> .....	45
<b>Heb. 4:12-13</b> .....	50
<b>Heb. 4:15</b> .....	50
Heb.13:15 .....	49
<b>1 John 2:26-27</b> .....	29





# **Being Strong**

*Rethinking Power*

***“...For Christ’s sake,  
I delight in  
weaknesses....For  
when I am weak,  
then I am  
strong.”***

# Being Strong

## *Our Common Struggle*

“Life is difficult,” wrote M. Scott Peck, M.D. in the opening line of his book, *The Road Less Traveled*. I didn’t have to read that to know that life has its difficulties. It’s a fact: an absolute reality. To believe that life on this earth is carefree and easy is to deny this fact. An even more subtle denial is to believe that “life *should* be easy.”

Experiencing “life” will eventually entail difficulties and problems; a two-year old who stumbles and bumps his head knows this. H.A. Williams (*Tensions: Necessary Conflicts In Life and Love*) said, “Conflict is Life.” Who is prepared for it? How can I face it? Indeed, *can* I face it and deal with it?—*all* of it?

*My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup>Ps. 31:10.

Life is difficult because life is full of conflict. Facing the conflicts of life is not easy. One must be strong in order to deal with the frustrations and grief, sadness and loneliness, guilt and regrets, fear and anger, anxiety and anguish, dependency and despair.

*My strength is dried up....But you, O LORD, be not far off; O my strength....<sup>2</sup>*

Most of our thinking and training is for success and advancement. When failure and defeat come, who is prepared for it? The usual reaction to life's conflicts is cursing, crying, moaning, or fretting. There is an alternative to the groan of defeat.

We can face and confront these problems and difficulties in God's paradoxical power: strength in weakness! Herein lies the secret to real strength. Here is the key to victory and triumph. We can turn disgrace to grace, ugly wounds into beautiful scars. A painful thorn can become a powerful tool! Jesus said:

*"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."<sup>3</sup>*

Life causes everyone to experience *brokenness* in varying degrees, through many ways, and for different periods of time. Being broken hurts! There is no miracle pill to make the pain cease, but in Christ we can learn to find helpful meaning in the suffering. Out of life's brokenness can come *wholeness of life in Jesus!*

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<sup>2</sup>Ps. 22:15, 19.

<sup>3</sup>John 16:33.

Jesus Christ experienced brokenness. He put on human flesh<sup>4</sup> and lived through not only our common human experiences, but a unique role as Suffering Servant and Lamb of God. He experienced the brokenness and pain that should have been ours for eternity. He can identify with us. He understands our afflictions and can give us strength in our weaknesses.<sup>5</sup> By understanding the pain and suffering that Jesus experienced, we can gain insight and find wholeness through brokenness, strength in weakness.

### ***Looking Beyond Weakness***

Most of us view any kind of weakness as simply “weakness”: a completely negative evaluation. We never dream that there could be power or strength in *weakness*. Paul gives a persuasive example of this concept:

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*<sup>6</sup>

Power made perfect in weakness? Delight in weakness? When I am weak, then I am strong? How can this be? First of all, we must desire to live a humble life. We cannot allow pride, especially spiritual pride, to threaten and destroy us.

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<sup>4</sup>See Phil. 2:6-8.

<sup>5</sup>See Heb. 4:15-16.

<sup>6</sup>2 Cor. 12:7-10.

Thorns keep us humble, preventing conceit. Unpleasant and painful experiences have a purpose in our spiritual maturity: they prevent us from being self-exalted. At first, Paul found his thorn, not empowering, but *overpowering*. It was so difficult to bear that he cried out to the Lord for its removal. He felt dismay, not delight; he did not understand that a thorn of weakness could save him from a spiritual fall. He couldn't yet fathom how much could be gained in his relationship to Christ from this painful situation. It is difficult for all of us to see through our pain. A wall of tears is hard to see through! But once we come to understand and accept what God has in mind for us, our tragedies can become treasures, and our thorns triumphs.

*The LORD is the stronghold of my life...<sup>7</sup>*

Often, we think we can overcome our weakness with a few words of discipline. We sometimes think that only a brief period of suffering in our lives will teach us the invaluable lessons that we need so much to learn. Not so. Our spiritual needs may be such that we need unrelenting adverse circumstances to motivate, revive, and strengthen us.

When a brief affliction or momentary constraint is removed, we often go back to our same old habits. Long-term change requires a process of conditioning. The crooked branch will not straighten if it is only held for a short while. It takes time and the constant support of something stronger than itself to become straight and strong. We can be humbled by affliction and temptations; but when these trials are too brief, we invariably return to our old way of thinking and living. As the sharpness of the thorn is removed, our consciences again

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<sup>7</sup>Ps. 27:1.

become dulled.

Paul's thorn was not taken away, but the Lord did answer him with the enlightening words that gave him power to endure.

*...“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”<sup>8</sup>*

Although his source of torment and tribulation remained, by these words, Paul knew he had the constant love and support of God in Christ. *Through* Paul's weakness, Jesus would become his *sole* source of strength!

### ***Finding Strength In God's Grace***

Grace comes to perfection and fullness when weakness is submitted to it. We need the grace of God, not only for salvation, but also for deliverance from the tribulations of everyday life. We must depend on grace to resist temptations and stand firm in the faith.<sup>9</sup> *God's grace is sufficient!*

Power comes to its ultimate strength in weakness. When one has reached the point of utter helplessness, having no control over his “thorns in the flesh,” he can only depend on the Lord as his Source of strength. He realizes he has no power in himself.

*...the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.<sup>10</sup>*

Paul allowed the strength of God's all-sustaining grace to penetrate his entire life by accepting his own helplessness.

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<sup>8</sup>2 Cor. 12:9. <sup>9</sup>Read carefully James 4:4-10; 1 Peter 5:5-10.

<sup>10</sup>1 Cor. 1:25.

He humbly and completely depended on the strength of Christ. He understood by actual experience that God's grace really is sufficient: His power is made perfect in weakness. The grace of God comes alive in ways we never dreamed possible. Every day we find that He gives us *more* grace<sup>11</sup> to help in our every need and to draw us closer to Himself<sup>12</sup> in humility, good works, and labors of love.

Paul boldly proclaimed the effects of God's grace in his own life of faith and dependence:

*But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them [apostles-L.D.]—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*<sup>13</sup>

The Holy Spirit, through the Word, encourages us to *stand* firm in the faith, *continue* in love, and *grow* in trust. By our humble submission to the power of His grace, God *can* accomplish these things in us.<sup>14</sup> We will truly find the fullness of Christ; we will find wholeness through brokenness; we will experience “strength in weakness.”

*Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song.*<sup>15</sup>

### ***Delighting In Weakness***

After the Lord answered Paul's pleading with His strengthening and life-giving answer, the apostle had a revolutionary

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<sup>11</sup>See James 4:6.   <sup>12</sup>See 1 Peter 5:5-6.   <sup>13</sup>1 Cor. 15:10.

<sup>14</sup>Carefully consider Heb. 13:9, 20-21.   <sup>15</sup>Ps. 28:6-7.

change in attitude. He then exclaimed that he would boast very gladly in his weaknesses, so that Christ's power might rest on him. He willingly submitted to his lowly circumstances for the sake of higher spiritual ends. He found that the abundant and unceasing grace which Christ provides enabled him to have peace, contentment, and a loving, accepting attitude toward all his trials.

A proper attitude is needed so that God's grace can transform our responses to life's troubles. Then we can learn the joy of uttering these words:

*...for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*<sup>16</sup>

We can *delight* in the truth that divine power and strength live within us when we endure or overcome our weaknesses—but it is *Christ's* strength, not ours!

*But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.*<sup>17</sup>

God alone is praised, for it is only by His grace and might that we survive weaknesses and tribulation in a God-glorifying way. We become willing and eager to learn the righteous characteristics of Jesus from life's afflictions and trying temptations. Only then can we deeply receive these godly qualities into our lives. Paul said that he *actually delighted* in the severe problems that he experienced. He didn't say that they wouldn't cause him to experience a great deal of emotional and physical pain. Persecution and other traumas hurt

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<sup>16</sup>2 Cor. 12:10. <sup>17</sup>2 Cor. 4:7.

profoundly.

Most of us initially ask, “How in the world can we delight in something that hurts us?” The basic purpose of pain must be understood before we can begin to grasp this concept of “delighting in weakness.”

In a fallen world, suffering must precede glory and wholeness. To share in the glory of Christ’s resurrection, we must know conformity to the likeness of His death. Even Christ had to approach the crown of glory through the cross of submission and suffering. We need to accept these fundamental realities, and live in peace and contentment through it all. We must find higher reasons for suffering, so that we can actually delight in it.

### *Making Suffering Count*

The pains, trials, tribulations, and temptations that we face are inflicted upon us by Satan and/or Self. When God, in His wisdom, allows these adversities in our lives, we should never believe the falsehood that the discipline of the Lord is a proof that God has rejected us; rather, it is evidence that we are His sons and daughters—if, indeed, we are. It is entirely possible that the sufferings we endure are a direct result of our commitment to Christ:

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ....<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>18</sup>1 Peter 4:12-13.

In the world we are going to have disappointments, difficulties, problems, hurt, pain, anguish, disillusionments: all kinds of suffering. Those without Jesus constantly ask the question: Why? But followers of Christ have something worthwhile for which to suffer. We can suffer trials *for Christ's sake*.

Without applying the biblical perspective, the best we can do in response to the problem of pain is resign ourselves to a morbid endurance of suffering. This attitude does not lift us out of ourselves and can only lead to more tribulations. Depression can develop as troubles mount. Resorting to chemical painkillers leads to even deeper complications. Followers of Christ can rise above themselves to a higher end and make personal suffering count. We can endure it for Christ's sake. We can be *thankful* and rejoice!

*O my Strength, I watch for you; you, O God, are my fortress, my loving God.*<sup>19</sup>

### *Suffering Means Glorification*

We can find joy in the fact that we are counted worthy in this present life to glorify God in suffering for Christ's sake. We can also look forward to being glorified by God in the future to come.<sup>20</sup>

*...our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.*<sup>21</sup>

“Glorification” is not a heavy theological concept. It simply means “to rise up, to honor, to extol.” Because we are all

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<sup>19</sup>Ps. 59:9-10.

<sup>20</sup>See Matt. 5:11-12.

<sup>21</sup>Rom. 8:18.

significant persons created in the image of God, we appreciate recognition. But self-centered recognition is prostituted recognition. It is purchased. The true and genuine person doesn't want this kind of honor. We need honor that comes unsolicited.

Who, but God our Father, can best honor and glorify us? It is our glorious God who honors and glorifies us—can you imagine that? Anticipate this and rejoice in your sufferings; *delight in them!*

### ***Finding Joy In The Testing Of Your Faith***

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.<sup>22</sup>*

James doesn't say we'll experience joy when we *look* for troubles, but rather, "whenever you *face* trials." Too many times *we* bring misery to ourselves and others. If you live a life of love, sensitivity, and humility, you are going to suffer painful experiences that you don't search for; thorns will come! But count it all joy, knowing that it works faith, steadfastness, and the development of the character of Christ in your life.

We say we want to be like Jesus, but do we really desire it at *any* cost? We must go through the fiery furnace of trouble—that is what it will take. Jesus, the Son of God, willingly stepped down from His heavenly throne and walked into the

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<sup>22</sup>James 1:2-4.

fiery furnace of this earthly life. He, more than anyone else, with an inner peace and joy, endured the testing of His faith.

*...he learned obedience from what he suffered, and, once made perfect....<sup>23</sup>*

Another outstanding biblical figure who obediently submitted to the testing of his faith was Abraham. Over and over again he was tried. The ultimate test of his faith, the one we so emotionally identify with, was God's requirement that he sacrifice his son, Isaac. Abraham had waited a lifetime for this son. God had promised him. But one day God said to Abraham:

*...“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.”<sup>24</sup>*

Abraham obeyed the Lord. He glorified God by not holding back. In surviving this trial, his faith relationship with God was probably never stronger. Because of his obedience in love, the Father snatched him out of this excruciatingly painful experience. And Abraham rejoiced in the Lord's goodness and mercy.

How would we come through a test like this? Could we give up the most cherished person in our lives? If put to the test, would not the average Christian become very confused and hesitant and even fail the test?

Can God ask too much of us? Can there be too much pain and

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<sup>23</sup>Heb. 5:8-9.

<sup>24</sup>Gen. 22:2.

suffering allowed in the testing of our faith? Could God allow us to be so severely tried that we cannot endure the test? The Holy Spirit in the Scriptures tells us the answer to these questions: an emphatic *no!*

*God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.*<sup>25</sup>

We are all at different levels of maturity. Abraham, through years of discipline, had been prepared through the many tests of his faith to undergo the painful trial concerning Isaac. And in his obedience he didn't lose sight of God's love and faithfulness. He learned discipline to greater and greater degrees as the years passed because of the continuous testing of his faith and constant reliance upon God. Abraham was blessed for his humble submission. The Lord gave him back his son. He delighted in the testing of his faith. Through weakness he became stronger!

We, also, are prepared as we grow in the testing of our faith. The Lord develops us by giving us the opportunity to *practice* what we've learned. Through practicing our faith we grow to greater levels of maturity. We can rejoice in this growth, for as we mature spiritually, the Lord can use us in greater service to His glory. With each new test, we learn that there is nothing greater we can depend on and no one we should trust in more than the great God of all grace and strength. There is such a peace, such a deeply felt joy in *totally trusting Him*. As our faith grows toward maturity, as selfishness is being dethroned in our hearts, Christ and His power will be expressed in us.

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<sup>25</sup>1 Cor. 10:13.

*I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.<sup>26</sup>*

Living in this truth and reality will give us the strength we need to overcome or endure any weakness that might befall us. Rejoice—for the testing of our faith is the means to this glorious end.

### ***Delight In Comforting Others***

Because of the strength and spiritual growth we experience by submitting ourselves to the Lord's power, we can delight in still another gift from above. The weaknesses we have learned to endure and overcome in Christ enable us to help others in their trials and temptations.

As we are continually strengthened and encouraged by the truths of God's Word, we are also sustained through the Lord's providential care. He uses others to bring about the help that we need in time of crisis.

As we mature and grow in strength, we can glorify God by helping others find power in their weakness.

*Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup>Gal. 2:20.

<sup>27</sup>2 Cor. 1:3-5.

Just as we've come to know the sensitivity and tenderness of the "Father of all compassion and God of all comfort," we've also experienced the same special qualities in the love and concern of our brothers and sisters. When we become distraught and are suffering affliction, people we never even imagined would care may give us such comfort and compassion. What motivates us to reach out to others during their troublesome times? First and foremost, all of us want to follow in the steps of Jesus. His entire life was devoted to helping others in their needs and comforting others in their trials and afflictions. We want to learn to do the same.

But there is something else that causes certain people's lives to "overflow" with comforting and encouraging words and actions. They have suffered greatly in their own lives.

*What a wonderful God we have—he is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the source of every mercy and the one who so wonderfully comforts and strengthens us in our hardships and trials. And why does he do this? So that when others are troubled, needing our sympathy and encouragement, we can pass on to them this same help and comfort God has given us. You can be sure that the more we undergo sufferings for Christ, the more he will shower us with his comfort and encouragement.<sup>28</sup>*

When we have suffered trials similar to those of a person in need, we have a *heart-felt* sensitivity to his or her problems. "The most painfully tried, the most proved in suffering, the

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<sup>28</sup>2 Cor. 1:4-5 (Kenneth Taylor, *The Living Bible* [Wheaton IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1967]).

souls that are best acquainted with grief, provided their consolation has abounded through Christ, are specially called to the ministry of comforting others.”<sup>29</sup> Comforting others in their suffering is a very valuable gift of God’s grace.<sup>30</sup> Suffering is the ultimate service.

Someone wrote a three minute drama about the Pool Of Bethesda (John 5:1ff) which illustrates my point. The main character of the play is a physician. The doctor, being ill from a wound he himself cannot heal, goes to the pool in Bethesda. As he approaches the water the angel attending the pool forbids him to enter. The physician is puzzled by the angel’s forbidding nature and questions him: “Why am I not allowed to enter the water? You have permitted thousands of others before me to do so; why not me?” But the messenger insists and then reveals the reason for not allowing the sick physician to submerge his body into the healing waters. “Sir,” said the angel, “without your wound, where would your power be?” As the doctor listens attentively in humble resolve, the angel concludes his astonishing remarks: “My good man, it is only the wounded who can truly labor in Love’s service.” In our weaknesses we are made strong.

While there are those who have been developed by God through suffering great hardship throughout their lives, all of us can identify with suffering of some kind. In experiencing hardships we can find comfort in the mere fact that we are partaking of the sufferings of Christ.<sup>31</sup> In addition, we can rejoice in sufferings, no matter how severe; for in them we find strength in weakness and victory in Christ.

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<sup>29</sup>James Denney, “The Second Epistle to the Corinthians,” *The Expositor’s Bible*, ed. by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1947), 5:727.

<sup>30</sup>See Rom. 12:8.

<sup>31</sup>See 2 Cor. 1:5.

*Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything.<sup>32</sup>*

Paul, through Christ, rejoiced in the mercy and comfort of God that sustained him through his many sufferings. He is a remarkable and inspiring example of the joy that can be found in hurting for Christ's sake. By enduring trials and finding strength in our sufferings, we too can be an incentive to others to persevere under their trials. Their faith will grow, as they also find victory in Christ.

With a sensitive depth of perception, we can accept that suffering is not only for our benefit,<sup>33</sup> but is also for the comfort and growth of others. With the right attitude toward tribulations, afflictions, temptations, and troubles of all kinds, we will always find "strength in weakness" through Christ. We will come to a greater love and appreciation for the "Father of compassion and the God of all comfort."

*Unless the LORD had given me help, I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death. When I said, "My foot is slipping," your love, O LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>32</sup>2 Cor. 6:4-10.

<sup>33</sup>See Isa.38:17. <sup>34</sup>Ps. 94:17-19.

As we grow in faith and strength in our weaknesses through the comfort and discipline of God, we will become assured of our place of safety in the love of Jesus Christ:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.<sup>35</sup>*

### ***Misbeliefs That Keep Us From Being Strong***

Many persons, including some of God's people, are not willing to accept some fundamental principles of life. How can we grow in strength if we do not perceive life in this world as it often truly is?—*difficult*. Those who live as though this were not true are not being honest with themselves. Life is difficult! Remember, “truth sets us free.”<sup>36</sup>

If we believe that life is not difficult, our lives will be detrimentally affected. We will not be free. “Truth sets you free”; that is a great theological statement. We have heard others say it and have read it in books, but this is a fact of practical experience. If I suddenly received a call, reporting

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<sup>35</sup>Rom. 8:35, 37-39. <sup>36</sup>See John 8:32.

that my wife had been murdered, I would be devastated: bound and shackled by this belief. But if, five minutes later, I saw her walk in the door, I would be set free. I would be freed from the deception that was holding me in bondage. From despair and pain, I would come to feel utter joy.

If we do not accept the truth and acknowledge the reality that life is difficult, we are going to have serious problems living in a pain-filled world. To believe that life is easy or without problems is to be unrealistic.

Life *is* difficult. But life is *not* impossible to live. We can rise above troublesome situations and even find value in them.

To believe that life *should* be easy is a misconception that seems to plague us constantly if we have not come to understand the concept of strength through weakness. We learn from the time we're small children that life is not easy. Stubbed toes: life is difficult. Mashed fingers: life is not easy. A child snatches a toy away from another—what is the deprived child learning? Life is difficult. A mother, looking out for a child's well-being, exhorts, "No, son, don't do that; that's dangerous!" He is learning that life is not easy.

Many Christians believe that, because they have become children of God, life will not have any more difficulties. Everything will be rosy. They paint a constant smile on their faces, but deep down inside they are fearful, believing that this smile *should* not crack for any reason. The "shoulds" of this kind of living will eventually overwhelm them. This kind of thinking leads to the misbelief that if one is suffering afflictions or trials of any kind he has somehow been unfaithful to the Lord, and God is punishing him for his sin.

Job's three friends believed this falsehood. They tried to convince Job that his own sinfulness had brought many afflictions upon him. They did not know the truth. It was because of the Lord's strong belief in Job's faithfulness that He *allowed* Satan to attack him so unmercifully.

Job suffered greatly, but he remained true to God. He did not curse God, as his own wife urged him to do. Although there were times, in his humanness, that his spirit became very low and he became confused and weak, he did not fall in rejecting God in spite of the severe afflictions with which Satan tested him. He kept the truth of God alive in himself and even confidently accused his friends in their misbelief:

*"I have heard many things [untruths-L.D.] like these; miserable comforters are you all!...I also could speak like you, if you were in my place; I could make fine speeches against you and shake my head at you. But my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief."<sup>37</sup>*

It is ironic that Job was accused by all those who came in contact with him during his afflictions. In the past, he was a great comforter and encourager. He was devoted to instructing many; he had strengthened feeble hands; his words supported those who stumbled; he strengthened faltering knees.<sup>38</sup>

Throughout Job's time of suffering he continued to cry out to the Lord in prayer. Finally, God answered him. Before restoring Job's health, prosperity, and family, God first turned to the three critics. He expressed His anger at their not having spoken what was right, as Job had. They were so blinded to

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<sup>37</sup>Job 16:2, 4-5. <sup>38</sup>See Job 4:3-4.

the truth that they were convinced they knew God's ways. By insisting on the falsehood that all suffering is punitive, they had limited God's wisdom. They could not see the spiritual value of suffering: to grow in the strength and faith that enables God's people to serve Him in greater ways.

Another principle that I have learned through years of study, counseling, and personal application is that the trying situation is usually less painful than one's reaction to it. Our reactions often cause us more distress than the circumstance itself. So, we become disillusioned and frustrated. This response brings about a string of problems which affect our thinking, our actions, and even, in turn, our physical health.

Most assuredly, we are reactionaries. Very few of us respond to an intense predicament with calm, objective evaluation and proper action. This is not to say that one's emotions should not be involved, but that they should be under control. This will enable us to make proper choices according to the conditions at hand.

### ***Strength In Overcoming The Common Temptation Of Anger***

An example of a practical life weakness that gets out of hand is the emotion of anger. When people selfishly demonstrate anger, they speak of having "lost it." Actually, the problem is that they have never really found it and controlled it.

Anger, as psychiatrists and social workers have come to believe, is a chosen expression. No one can "make you mad"; no one can cause you to "fly off the handle," whether verbally or physically. No, it is something we *choose* to do

which sets off a chain reaction. Lives become frustrated, fragmented, and broken. But we can find wholeness through this brokenness, strength in this weakness. Anger is an emotion that can be controlled and channeled correctly; anger can be expressed in a constructive way, a righteous way.

Destructive anger is an emotional inclination to attack. It is provoked by selfishness.<sup>39</sup> Selfish anger has many expressions, including resentment, bitterness,<sup>40</sup> and hatred. These emotions originate in the heart. Feelings are soon displayed by actions: quarreling,<sup>41</sup> sarcasm, criticism, gossip, revenge,<sup>42</sup> assault, and fits of rage. But don't fool yourself: these heart emotions can also be displayed in a covert way. The "silent treatment," the "arm's length syndrome," and the "If-I-don't-see-you, you're-not-really-there" game are also expressions of anger.

There are many causes or sources from which this destructive anger arises. One might lack a *feeling* of power over oneself, other people, and circumstances. There can also be a lack of *feeling* regarding personal self-significance and self-sufficiency.

Diminishing *feelings* of importance can cause the loss of a sense of self-worth. The frustration of desiring unachievable perfection can also be a contributing factor. Many people have learned from faulty environmental conditioning that angry actions and words are the only ways to respond to the angry feelings within.<sup>43</sup> But how can we change these selfish feelings of anger? How do we find wholeness through the

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<sup>39</sup>See Prov. 15:1, 18.   <sup>40</sup>See Eph. 4:31-32.   <sup>41</sup>See Eph. 4:29.

<sup>42</sup>See Rom. 1:29ff.

<sup>43</sup>Carefully consider Prov. 22:24-25.

brokenness that evolves out of the feelings and actions of anger? How do we find strength in this weakness?

First, we must face the *truth* of anger's existence within our hearts, and the havoc it causes. We must also look within ourselves and find the *truth* concerning the deep-felt causes of these ruinous actions. Then, we must correct our understanding of anger and recognize that these *feelings* are there because of unrealistic expectations. The correct understanding, and consequently the right choices, will defeat this selfish, destructive anger. *There can be constructive choices* made in response to angry feelings.

We should then courageously admit all feelings of resentment, bitterness, strife, hatred, rage, and malice. We must also learn to make calm and correct observations, and to develop accurate interpretations of all situations. Where dissension has occurred, humbly seek immediate reconciliation.<sup>44</sup> And don't be a perfectionist; no one is perfect—not even you!

We must ultimately remember that our relationship with God and the precious people created in His image is more important than the things that are frustrating us, tempting us to express anger. We must learn to leave vengeance to God. If we apply these principles, we can turn the weakness of anger into strength.

In attempting to practice these suggestions to defeat anger in our lives, we must keep in mind that these can only be

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<sup>44</sup>See Eph. 4:26-27.

accomplished if we truly depend on Christ's strength, not our own. Completely relying on His power that works in us, we can be victorious over anger or any weakness.

### ***Nonacceptance Of Unpleasant Realities Causes Conflict***

Refusing to face the fact that life is filled with problems, afflictions, misfortunes, and other difficulties causes conflict within us. It is not easy to accept the strain of living in this imperfect world. But if we don't, the conflicts that this denial brings about will cause us to turn to our own destructive desires. We will continually find ourselves frustrated; we will experience guilt, fear, regret, anguish, and even despair. In order to deal with these reactions of nonacceptance, many turn to drugs, alcohol, withdrawal, isolation, pursuit of selfish endeavors, sexual promiscuity, and many other escape routes. These may seem to deaden the pain of conflict for a short while, but soon they create *much more* pain, confusion, and hopelessness.

Sometimes, we can't even accept *small* conflicts in our lives. For instance, when a planned picnic or some other outing is ruined by inclement weather, what is the common reaction? We complain, fret, gripe, perhaps even swear and curse. If we can't calmly and graciously accept the trivial conflicts, how are we ever going to face the very difficult problems of life?

One of the most common fears with which we all must deal is caused by nonacceptance of the reality that we will all eventually die. Death may take us by surprise at any time. We just do not have control over it; God in His wisdom controls both life and death.

When severe illness strikes, most people don't want to accept the potential threat it poses to their lives. I once saw a documentary about a woman who was afflicted with a violent form of cancer. One whole side of her body was being eaten away before her very eyes. The disease had destroyed many of her vital organs, but her mind was not in any way affected. She was very intelligent and alert. Even when the doctors continually informed her that she would not live much longer, she would not accept the reality that she was going to die. She confidently announced to her doctor and family that she was going to live another twenty or thirty years. But she died within a few weeks.

Often, the one who is stricken with an illness that is leading to his or her death can accept it, but members of the family will not. This nonacceptance of the fact that a loved one is going to die causes shock, sometimes leading to severe depression and even despair when the loved one does pass away. Sooner or later we all must face the reality of our own death and the passing away of those we love.

Fear of death causes many other phobias that control people's actions and life-styles. Some people actually lock themselves away in a house for years on end, for fear that something will happen to them if they step outside. Others are afraid to go over bridges, frightened to ride in a car, and many would never set foot in an elevator. There are many fears that could inhibit one from living a full and anxiety-free life.

If we could only develop a strong faith and trust in the wisdom of God, we would rest in the fact that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have

been called according to his purpose.”<sup>45</sup>

We would be accepting of all difficulties and would not even fear death itself.

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.*<sup>46</sup>

### ***Strength In Weakness Through Prayer***

One of the most powerful tools God has given us for developing strength in weakness, in tribulation, in trouble, and in trials is *prayer*. We can continually go to the Father, exchanging the cares and troubles of this world for the joy of the Lord. Close communion with Him lifts the burdens from our heavy hearts.

*Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always.*<sup>47</sup>

*For who is God besides the LORD? And who is the Rock except our God? It is God who arms me with strength and makes my way perfect.*<sup>48</sup>

In order to reap the benefits of prayer we must have great faith in its power, and entertain no doubts. Jesus assures us, “Whatever you ask for in prayer, *believe* that you have received it, and it will be yours.”<sup>49</sup> But we must also pray in humble submission, as Jesus did, wanting only the Lord’s will in everything.<sup>50</sup> It could be very detrimental to our well-being if we prayed in ignorance and vanity and received what we selfishly asked for. In prayer we must be convinced of the

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<sup>45</sup>Rom. 8:28.

<sup>46</sup>Ps. 23:4.

<sup>47</sup>1 Chron. 16:11.

<sup>48</sup>2 Sam. 22:32-33.

<sup>49</sup>Mark 11:24.

<sup>50</sup>Read carefully 1 John 5:14-15.

Father's great love and concern for us in considering our possible shortsightedness. God provides us with the freedom of not having to worry about anything.

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>51</sup>*

There is a great peace and rest to be found in prayer. For we know that God withholds nothing that is good for us and that will assist us in growing in the character of Christ.

Many times, when we pray to the Lord in desperation and great pain, He does not remove our hurt immediately, or even eventually. But we rest in the truth of God's Word: His grace *is enough* for each of us. We will always find comfort and strength in weakness through devout prayer, no matter what troubles the Lord may providentially hold out to us in life.

*The Lord is my strength and my song....<sup>52</sup>*

Paul did not find relief from his torment through prayer, but his heart did become established in great joy and strength in the midst of any hardships he would have to bear the rest of his life. The apostle learned to endure suffering and to continue in strength of faith. He also delighted in it because Christ's power was made perfect in weakness. As devoted followers of Christ, we can do the same.

David was one who constantly beseeched the Lord in prayer

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<sup>51</sup>Phil. 4:6-7. <sup>52</sup>Exod. 15:2.

for strength in his struggles and anguish. And he waited for His answers with *expectation*:

*Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. Morning by morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; morning by morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*<sup>53</sup>

David's prayers show his great faith and trust, that the faithful would be delivered through prayer. They will lack no good thing.

*I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.*<sup>54</sup>

David constantly *praised* the Lord in *gratitude* along with his loud cries and petitions:

*I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.*<sup>55</sup>

Jesus Christ suffered terribly in the Garden of Gethsemene. He went there to pray for strength. "...he began to be deeply distressed and troubled."<sup>56</sup> He shared with Peter, James, and John: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."<sup>57</sup> Then He fell to the ground and humbly prayed, "Abba, Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."<sup>58</sup> Even though emotionally suffering to the point that he felt death at

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<sup>53</sup>Ps. 5:1-3.

<sup>54</sup>Ps. 34:4-6.

<sup>55</sup>Ps. 34:1-3.

<sup>56</sup>Mark 14:33.

<sup>57</sup>Mark 14:34.

<sup>58</sup>Mark 14:36.

His door, He still had the *strength* to lift the Father's desires above His own pain. Taking the time to commune intimately with the Father in prayer gave Him the power to face with courage the trial that was before him: betrayal, scourging, and death on a cross.

The strength we gain through prayer should be a source of continual praise and thanksgiving to our Father who lifts up the brokenhearted. He may not give us what we cry out for, but He does give us power to endure all suffering!

*...but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.<sup>59</sup>*

### ***Strength In Weakness Realized***

Even though life *is* difficult, it need not be defeating. *Glory* in your weaknesses—failures are not fatal! *Accept* your weaknesses—frustrations are not final! You may have to *live on* with a broken body, a broken heart, a broken home, or shattered dreams—but not without *strength!*

*Acknowledge* your weaknesses, for in them power is made perfect! Jesus faced His helplessness when

*...he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him....<sup>60</sup>*

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<sup>59</sup>Isa. 40:31. <sup>60</sup>Heb. 5:7ff.

*Delight* in your weakness, for when you are weak, strength comes to its fullness. “*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*”<sup>61</sup> Christ’s power rests upon those who believe this great truth spoken by the God of “more grace.”

Are you weak? What is your thorn? Accept the truth and receive God’s power and grace so you can face life’s problems and difficulties, rise above them, and triumph over them by allowing God to turn your weakness into strength.

With God’s grace *everything* pays a profit. You will be able to get *something* out of *everything*—even defeat! Every trial will yield its victory. Every sickness will grow into wholeness. Every criticism will stimulate growth. Every disappointment will produce a delight. Severed relationships will provide a new beginning. Every broken dream and shattered hope will give birth to a new dream and an even greater hope. In every thorn there will be triumph. And every weakness can be an opportunity for Christ’s power to be made perfect in you.

*“But now be strong....Be strong....Be strong....For I am with you,” declares the LORD Almighty.*”<sup>62</sup>

*The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.*<sup>63</sup>

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup>2 Cor. 12:9. <sup>62</sup>Hag. 2:4. <sup>63</sup>Hab. 3:19. <sup>64</sup>Eph. 6:10.

## Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Gen. 22:2 .....	69	4:7 .....	65
Exod. 15:2 .....	84	6:4-10 .....	74
2 Sam. 22:32-33 .....	83	12:7-10 .....	61
1 Chron. 16:11 .....	83	12:9.....	63,87
Job 4:3-4 .....	77	12:10 .....	65
Job. 16:2, 4-5 .....	77	Gal 2:20 .....	71
Ps. 5:1-3 .....	85	Eph. 4:26-27 .....	80
22:15, 19 .....	60	4:29 .....	79
23:4 .....	83	4:31-32 .....	79
27:1 .....	62	6:10 .....	87
28:6-7 .....	64	Phil 2:6-8 .....	61
31:10 .....	59	4:6-7 .....	84
34:1-3 .....	85	Heb. 4:15-16 .....	61
34:4-6 .....	85	5:7ff .....	86
59:9-10 .....	67	Heb. 5:8-9 .....	69
94:17-19 .....	74	13:9, 20-21 .....	64
Prov. 15:1, 18 .....	79	James 1:2-4 .....	68
22:24-25 .....	79	4:4-10 .....	63
Isa. 38:17 .....	74	4:6 .....	64
40:31 .....	86	1 Peter 4:12-13 .....	66
Hab. 3:19 .....	87	5:5-6 .....	64
Hag. 2:4 .....	87	5:5-10 .....	63
Matt. 5:11-12 .....	67	1 John 5:14-15 .....	83
Mark 11:24 .....	83		
14:33 .....	85		
14:34 .....	85		
14:36 .....	85		
John 8:32 .....	75		
16:33 .....	60		
Rom. 1:29 .....	79		
8:18 .....	67		
8:28 .....	83		
8:35, 37-39 .....	75		
12:8 .....	73		
1 Cor. 1:25 .....	63		
10:13 .....	70		
15:10 .....	64		
2 Cor. 1:3-5 .....	71		
1:4-5 .....	72		
1:5 .....	73		





# **Being Understanding**

*Recovering Sensitivity*

***“Even when I  
don’t understand...  
I will be  
understanding!”***

# BEING UNDERSTANDING

## *Must We Understand To Be Understanding?*

My primary ministry as a member of the body of Christ is teaching, which also entails a good deal of personal counseling. As a counselor, I was once of the persuasion that, before I could be of any practical help to a troubled person, I first had to understand; for every effect there had to be a knowable and explainable cause! If this chapter leaves you with any single lasting impression, I hope it is this: *Even when I don't understand, I can still be understanding.* This simple concept can be the decisive factor in determining whether we will suffer frustration and failure in personal relationships, or enjoy fulfillment and effectiveness in relating to other people. Although I may not understand, I will be an understanding person.

Nowhere is there a greater need for personal understanding than in family relationships, and particularly between husband and wife. Until recently, there was a tendency toward "uni-sex" in modern thought which all but obliterated the distinctive natures of mankind as male and female.

Differences between the sexes that had once been too obvi-

ous to deny were being minimized—even denied—in order to advance certain cultural transformations and trends. Among those downplayed differences was the distinctiveness of the male and female mentalities. Men and women seem to differ from one another in the way they think—that is, in the way their minds analyze, process, and utilize information. Recent studies in psychology and cerebral anatomy tend to confirm this difference between the sexes. Unless we understand and appreciate this difference between men and women, we will have certain problems in our relationships that might well have been avoided.

For example, men generally have a strong “cause and effect” orientation in their thought processes: for every effect, there must be an adequate cause. When a husband comes home and finds that his wife has been crying, he immediately wants to know “*what’s* wrong.” What is the cause of this emotional response? His almost instinctive reaction to the situation is to ask his spouse to explain the cause of her tears. And it often happens that the wife cannot give a logical, step by step analysis of the phenomenon. It may be one particular thing; it may be the cumulative effect of a number of things; it may simply be “that time of the month.” But whatever the true explanation for these tears, the husband will probably think: “It’s me.” He may have good reason to suspect his own blame! But unless he is sensitive and aware of the differences between male and female human beings, communication and relationship will suffer—not only between husband and wife, but also between God and man:

*Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner [women are physiologically different from men-L.D.] and as*

*heirs with you of the gracious gift of life [the wife is the husband's personal equal-L.D.], so that nothing will hinder your prayers.<sup>1</sup>*

## ***Communication Breakdown***

Understanding is difficult because most people don't communicate well. Good communication takes time and effort. Often, communication barely begins before someone becomes indignant and storms out of the room. No understanding has been reached. Relationships break down when communication breaks down. If we will invest the time and effort necessary to learn good communication skills, we can avoid paying the high premiums that so many are now paying for failing in personal relationships: divorce; church divisions; estrangement between parents and their children; disputes between labor and management, and so on. Norman Wright offers the following illustrations of communication breakdown:

*A wife was overheard saying to her husband, "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you think you heard is not what I meant."*

*In the classified ad section of a small-town newspaper, the following ad appeared on Monday: "FOR SALE: R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Phone 958 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him cheap."*

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<sup>1</sup>1 Peter 3:7.

*On Tuesday: "NOTICE: We regret having erred in R. D. Jones' ad yesterday. It should have read: One sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958 and ask for Mrs. Kelly who lives with him after 7 p.m."*

*On Wednesday: "R. D. Jones has informed us that he has received several annoying telephone calls because of the error we made in his classified ad yesterday. His ad stands corrected as follows: FOR SALE: R. D. Jones has one sewing machine for sale. Cheap. Phone 958 after 7 p.m. and ask for Mrs. Kelly who loves with him."*

*Finally on Thursday: "NOTICE: I, R. D. Jones, have no sewing machine for sale. I smashed it. Don't call 958 as the telephone has been taken out. I have not been carrying on with Mrs. Kelly. Until yesterday she was my housekeeper, but she quit." <sup>2</sup>*

If written communication can become so confusing, how much greater caution must be taken in spoken communication, which is spontaneous and not subject to editorial revisions! Yet, most of us enter into life's most crucial relationships without any formal training, or even serious reflection, regarding the art of communication.

In our naivety, we hope that love alone will automatically cause everything to fall into place in our relationships. Consequently, we go on being hurt and hurting one another. Good intentions are important, but the cause of our relational problems is not simply a matter of motives.

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<sup>2</sup>Norman Wright, *An Answer To Family Communication* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1977), pp. 1-2.

## ***Communication: The Two-Way Street***

Communication is a process of sharing oneself. Sometimes this sharing is done through verbal means, and sometimes through nonverbal. Each person has two roles to play in the process: we must both give *and* take; transmit *and* receive; speak *and* listen. Being a good speaker is important, but it is only half of the discipline of good communication. The naturally self-centered attitude of mankind (apart from Christ) causes most of us to pay more attention to speaking than to listening. We tend to enjoy being the center of attention, but Jesus is in the business of cleansing and correcting our self-centered characteristics. Repeatedly, Jesus urged both His disciples and the multitudes to *take heed*, to *listen* carefully:

*“He who has ears, let him hear.”*<sup>3</sup>

The apostles and prophets of the Lord also commanded that careful attention be given to both sides of the communication process:

*Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*<sup>4</sup>

*But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.*<sup>5</sup>

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's*

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<sup>3</sup>Matt. 11:15. Compare Matt. 13:9, 13-17, 43; Luke 9:44; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22.

<sup>4</sup>Col. 4:6. Compare Eph. 4:29; 5:4; 1 Peter 3:15.

<sup>5</sup>1 Cor. 14:19.

*anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.*<sup>6</sup>

John Drakeford wrote a book entitled *The Awesome Power of the Listening Ear*. But how few are using that power! An old cliché states that since God gave each of us two ears but only one mouth, we ought to do twice as much listening as talking! This is only another illustration of the fact that we are careless with our words, for we don't seem to mean what we say. If we did, we would quote only the clichés that we take to heart in our lives.

### ***The Origin Of Meaningful Communication***

Where there is love, there must be communication. Love refuses to remain inactive and anonymous. Love inevitably expresses itself, moving outward from subject to object, from lover to beloved.

*When communication breaks down, love is blocked and its energy will turn to resentment and hostility.*<sup>7</sup>

As human beings, we are made in the image of the communicating God. God (as Father, Son, and Spirit) has always been a God of love and communication, for within Himself there is an eternal relationship. Before the foundation of the world, love and communication among the Father, Son, and Spirit caused an eternal purpose of redemption in Christ to be

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<sup>6</sup>James 1:19-20.

<sup>7</sup>Reuel Howe, *Herein Is Love* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1961), p. 99.

expressed.<sup>8</sup> Through the Son who has always expressed the Being of the Father, God spoke the universe into existence and commanded its chaos to become order.<sup>9</sup> Man is the crowning achievement of God's creative work: he is the verbalizer, the artist. Man is a compulsive self-expressionist. From the cave paintings of ancient man to the modern satellite broadcasting system, the uniqueness of man as the communicating creature is obvious.

Man is wonderful, because he is made in the image of God; but man is also terrible among all the creatures of the earth, for he has become twisted by sin (selfishness). Man has turned away from his Creator and attempts to center his existence around himself. He still bears the divine image, but it is marred. The brokenness of man in his relationship to God is evidenced by his brokenness in relationship to himself (psychological disintegration) and his fellow human beings (social alienation). But the bottom line explanation of man's brokenness, and the brokenness that occurs in his relationships and communication, is his own selfishness. Selfishness blocks and prohibits mutual understanding among human beings more than any other single factor.

### ***Selfishness Versus Communication***

*What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something*

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<sup>8</sup>See Rom. 16:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:6-10; Eph. 1:3-14; 3:1-11; Col. 1:24-27; 2 Tim. 1:8-10; Titus 1:1-3; 1 Peter 1:10-12, 18-20.

<sup>9</sup>Read Gen. 1:1ff and compare John 1:1-3, 10; 17:5, 24; 1 Cor. 8:5-6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:1-3; 11:3; Rev. 4:11.

*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.*<sup>10</sup>

Among the rarest of biblical quotations are the words, “I have sinned.” If my counting is correct, this direct confession (in its different forms) occurs no more than fourteen times in the entire Bible! It is another paradox of the kingdom of God that those whose lives are most deeply enslaved to sin have the least sensitivity to their true condition, while those whose lives are closest to conformity with Christ have an acute awareness of their own sinfulness:

*But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, [John] said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?” ...Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”<sup>11</sup>*

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, “Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”<sup>12</sup>*

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.<sup>13</sup>*

It is extremely difficult to come to terms with the reality of

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<sup>10</sup>James 4:1-3. Compare 2 Peter 1:4.

<sup>11</sup>Matt. 3:7, 13-14. Compare Matt. 21:23-32; 23:13ff; Luke 7:36-50; John 8:31ff; 9:39-41.

<sup>12</sup>Luke 5:8. Compare Isa. 6:5; Dan. 9:4ff; 10:12.

<sup>13</sup>1 Tim. 1:15. Compare Rom. 7:24; 1 Cor. 15:9-10; Eph. 3:8.

one's own sinfulness. We wiggle and squirm, clear our throats, and instinctively offer excuses and rationalizations. We try to minimize our guilt by comparing ourselves with others. All of this is done to protect ego: King Self. I used to think that the essence of sin was pride, but that is not so. Have you ever noticed how strongly the Bible speaks about the urgency of putting "self" to death? Selfishness is the essence of sin:

*Then He said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."*<sup>14</sup>

*I have been crucified with Christ and I [ego] no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*<sup>15</sup>

Jesus said that being His disciple means self's demands must be denied, both in daily practice and as a life commitment. Paul said (translating the sense of the Greek text): "My ego no longer lives"—that is, the master of Paul's life was no longer ego (self), but the indwelling Christ.

Healthy self-respect and self-esteem are part of the birthright of every child of God. We cannot love our neighbor properly until we have learned from God how to love ourselves. But *self-love* and *selfish* love are two different things. I am to love other selves as much as my own particular self, because

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<sup>14</sup>Luke 9:23-24. Compare Matt. 10:37-39; 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 14:25-27; John 12:23-26.

<sup>15</sup>Gal. 2:20. Compare Rom. 6:1ff; Eph. 4:17-24; Phil. 3:7-11; Col. 3:1-11.

all selves are equally created in the image of God, and equally loved as sinners for whom Christ died. Selfish love prefers one's own self to all others, on the false premise that the most important self in the universe is the self that one happens to be. In other words, self-love is God-centered; selfish love is ego-centered. Any love that centers on self instead of God is not really "love" at all; "selfish love" is a contradiction in terms:

*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.<sup>16</sup>*

*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.<sup>17</sup>*

Real love is outgoing toward others because it is centered in, and modeled after, the love that God has revealed in Jesus Christ. Much of what is called "love" today is only the manipulation of one's fellow human beings in order to attain self-centered goals: power consolidation, property acquisition, personal prestige, and so on. There is no genuine interest in others because God's point of view is ignored. Without love, there cannot be good communication. There can be only pretentious manipulation and self-centered indifference.

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<sup>16</sup>1 John 4:7-8.

<sup>17</sup>1 John 3:16. Compare John 3:16; 1 John 4:9-11.

## ***Communication Is Life***

Communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another by the use of signs and symbols. The sender encodes a message into various signs and symbols. The receiver decodes the signs into a meaning: hopefully, the meaning originally intended by the sender! If all communication on every level were to somehow cease throughout the universe, life itself would cease. In fact, communication *is* life.

Consider the genetic code, the biochemical basis of heredity in all known life forms: the language of life spoken into existence by the Creator. Without the transmission of genetic messages through this amazing alphabet of nucleic acid molecules, life as we know it could not exist. Yet, we fail to take communication seriously as a vital factor in life's relationships. Until we do, we are going to have serious problems.

### ***Basic Conditions For Good Communication***

One of the world's most extensive communications industries chose a slogan that clearly proclaims the close relationship between love and understanding in personal relationships: "Reach out and touch someone." In other words, care enough about others to communicate effectively. To reap an intimate and understanding personal relationship with another person, one must be willing to invest time and effort

cultivating the soil of good communication. Any good book on the subject of person-to-person communication will touch on at least a few of the following basic conditions for good spoken communication.<sup>18</sup>

1. *Persons*: A genuine speaker and listener are essential. Conversing in clichés and mechanical “answering machine” responses will not do. Ladies, when your husband is reading the newspaper at the breakfast table while you are trying to speak to him about something that concerns you, how do you feel as he nods and grunts behind his paper? Do you feel like pursuing deeper communication on this level, or would you rather continue the conversation *after* turning his newspaper into a pile of shredded breakfast cereal?

2. *Message*: Even Mr. Ed (the talking horse of television’s “golden age”) would never speak unless he had something to say.

3. *Desire for response*: Lecture, platitudes, and rhetorical questions can kill good communication.

4. *Attentiveness*: The speaker is responsible to secure attention; the listener is responsible to give it.

5. *Audibility*: The speaker must use a volume level appropriate to both the environment and the listener’s needs. Clear pronunciation is also important; avoid muttering or murmuring.

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<sup>18</sup>One such book provided an outline of nine elements essential for effective communication, which I have here revised and adapted. I acknowledge my debt to George W. Fluharty and Harold R. Ross, authors of *Public Speaking: A Barnes and Noble Handbook* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1966), pp. 2-4.

6. *Common meanings*: There must be mutual agreement in understanding linguistic signs and symbols (words). Insist on clear definitions when someone uses a word you don't understand. If we care enough to understand, we will not let pride stand in the way of reality and honesty: "What do you mean by that word? It is not in my vocabulary."

7. *Mutual experience*: Closely related to common understanding of words is a shared field of experience. This is particularly important where the communicators are coming from diverse cultural backgrounds. It is necessary to establish common ground from which to build mutual understanding. Obviously, the closer the cultural ties between two people, the less obstacles there will be to clear communication. On the other hand, the most important bond of experience that exists between any two people is that of humanness: being created in the image of God.

8. *Sequence*: Logic, organization, and proper priorities are important in communication. I must return to my earlier observations about the differences between the male and female mentalities.

I do a lot of communicating with women in the various relationships that God has entrusted to me: my wife, my daughters and granddaughters, my secretary, my sisters in the Lord.

I have found that most women think in colorful imagery. In their minds they see beautiful, vivid pictures which they often expect the listener to immediately recognize and fill in. In describing what is in her mind, the female often seems to leave out details which she assumes the hearer can see as

clearly as she does. And, whereas male communicators tend to progress logically through a sequence of steps in conveying their thoughts, the female seems much less restricted to chronology and sequence. She may suddenly shift from first to fifth without so much as a passing nod to gears two, three, and four. This makes her communication much less dry and boring than that of the typical male, but also much more challenging to understand.

Her male counterpart is absolutely lost concerning the relationship of “fifth” to “first” in the development of her thoughts. To be complete, mankind needs both the predictable stability of the male rationale and the unfettered sensitivity of the female mentality, communicating together in mutual understanding and harmonious balance.

9. *Vocal elements*: These include proper emphasis, pause, pitch, and tone of voice.

### ***Essentials Of Good Communication***

There are two basic elements that can make or break the quality of human communication.

First, there is *intellectual content* (verbal): This is the literal, grammatical message that is communicated by words only.

Second, there is *mechanical-psychological content* (non-verbal): This includes such factors as tone of voice, facial expressions, and “body language.” We may send mixed signals that require extremely careful interpretation. Words

cannot always be taken at face value. We may say one thing with our words, but simultaneously convey an entirely different (even opposite) meaning through nonverbal means.

Consider the different messages that can be inferred by the same seven words when the emphasis is shifted in each case:

“Will you please take out the trash?” (A simple request is made.)

“Will you **please** take out the trash?” (A tense reminder is given.)

“**Will you please take out the trash!**” (An exasperated ultimatum is issued.)

Body language can also affect the intended meaning of words, as is seen when identical sentences are read in the light of different narrative contexts:

“I really don’t care if you go fishing.” (The wife looks lovingly into her husband’s eyes, smiles broadly, and hands him a cup of coffee.)

“I really don’t care if you go fishing.” (The wife scowls, throws down the dish towel, and storms out of the room.)

Again, it is obvious that verbal content is only half of the communication process, and often not even the decisive half in determining the speaker’s meaning. At face value, the wife’s words in the illustration above would probably be taken as her consent to the husband’s fishing plans. Unless he

is a careful interpreter of the nonverbal side of communication, he will most likely grab his fishing tackle, bait box, and pole—whether or not his wife really would prefer that he grab the paint brush or the lawn mower instead. It should be understood that my illustrations are given from the perspective of the husband as the receiver of communication, since this is my realm of personal experience.

But communication works the same way when the wife is the receiver: “I really don’t care if you’re going out” could mean that the husband is happy to give Mom a break from chores and children; or it could mean that he is sulking about playing the role of the house husband. Sensitivity to both verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication is essential for husbands, wives, and everyone who desires strong relationships in an environment of mutual understanding.

### ***Barriers To Good Communication***

Certain attitudes and habits can be deadly to effective communication, whether in the home, classroom, marketplace, workplace, or elsewhere. Here are some of the most common barriers to good communication:

1. *Materialism*: I am not primarily referring to atheistic philosophy, but to the practice of putting *things* before people in our daily lives. In affluent societies such as our own, material blessings can become a curse when we forget to be thankful to our Creator. Discontentment leads to envy, greed, and covetousness. Personal relationships take a back seat to

the acquisition of “stuff,” and security is sought in the things of this world rather than in God.

Historically, fathers have been the chief offenders in this area, sacrificing their marriages and children on the altar of worldly “success.” With the arrival of the age of two income economics and day-care centers, mothers are also susceptible to guilt in this area. Children make up the biggest percentage of materialism’s casualty list. The late Harry Chapin brilliantly exposed the materialism monster in all its true ugliness in his song, “Cat’s In The Cradle”:

*“...When ya comin’ home, dad?” “I don’t know when; but we’ll get together then, son. You know we’ll have a good time then.”*

The trouble is, “some day” never comes, and the child grows up “just like dad (and-or mom).” The lesson is thoroughly taught and learned, passed from generation to generation: “*Things* matter more than people.” Unless this monster is confronted head-on, it will continue to devour our families, and eventually our whole society!

As a missionary to New Zealand, I helped in establishing a school of biblical studies to equip church members to serve the Lord more effectively. I was spending ninety hours weekly in preparation and teaching of classes. It finally dawned on me that I was sinning against my two pre-teenage daughters. At that point, I made a vow before the Lord that I would put aside the books (no matter how busy I was), and would give my time to my children whenever they might need me. Anything that claims to be “the Lord’s work,” but demands a place in our priorities above the needs of our

spouses or children, is an idol.

Like Molech, the detestable god of the Ammonites, materialism and career-enslavement are gods to which many are deliberately sacrificing their sons and daughters, their marriages and families. The people of God are not beyond the possibility of seduction by this modern Molech.

Jesus came to bring abundant life, but the paradox here is that abundance means simplicity. Jesus wants to simplify our complicated lives:

*“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”*<sup>19</sup>

*He said to another man, “Follow me.” But the man replied, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” Jesus said to him, “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”*<sup>20</sup>

*“Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “you are worried and upset about many things, but only one is needed.”*<sup>21</sup>

*“No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”*<sup>22</sup>

God Himself is the central focus of the kingdom of God, and *human beings* are God’s main concern. If God has revealed that human beings are His main concern, then right relation-

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<sup>19</sup>Matt. 6:31-33.

<sup>20</sup>Luke 9:59-60.

<sup>21</sup>Luke 10:41-42.

<sup>22</sup>Matt. 6:24.

ships with people must be second only to fellowship with God on our list of priorities. The placing of higher priority on “things” than on God destroys our incentive to communicate well with people.

2. *Critical, fault-finding attitude:* More attention is being given today to the debilitating effects of psychological abuse on the human personality and on social order. “You Always Hurt the One You Love,” proclaimed a popular song title of some years ago.

While we recognize that song writers have a flair for exaggeration and generalization, who would deny that people tend to place heavier demands and higher expectations on those closest to their hearts? We want our spouses, children, friends, employees, and co-workers to be the best around. The failings of other people’s associates are not our concern (we think). There is an element of truth here: we do indeed have a unique degree of personal responsibility for the people whom the Lord entrusts to our care. But all of us ultimately answer to one Judge, and He has not appointed any of us to act in His unique role:

*For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: “‘As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘Every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.’” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup>Rom. 14:9-13. Compare Matt. 7:1-5; 23:1-12; 2 Cor. 5:10;

Husband and wife, parent and child, slave and master are all under the same Lord.<sup>24</sup> Each of us must answer to Him concerning the way we treat one another. A practice of intimidation, “put downs,” threats, and disrespect toward our fellow human beings will not be ignored by the One to whom we will give account.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, such a posture toward other people renders one ineffective in one’s own stewardship. People will not approach one from whom they can expect only negative criticism, personal rejection, and psychological abuse. Such a person is unqualified to hold a position of responsibility in the household of God:

*Since an overseer is entrusted with God’s work, he must be blameless—not overbearing, not quick tempered....<sup>26</sup>*

The Spirit, through Paul, also admonishes those to whom God has entrusted leadership in the home:

*Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them....Fathers, do not embitter your children, or they will become discouraged.<sup>27</sup>*

God has entrusted the man of the family with responsibility for maintaining an atmosphere of love and openness in the home. His example and influence sets the tone for the whole family. Good communication and strong relationships in the home largely depend on the husband’s attitude and response to his wife and children. This does not mean that he is

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<sup>24</sup>See especially Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:17-4:1; 1 Peter 2:13-3:12.

<sup>25</sup>See Luke 12:41-46.

<sup>26</sup>Titus 1:7.

<sup>27</sup>Col. 3:19, 21.

accountable for their sins, but that he has a ministry before the Lord for which he is responsible, as a husband and a father.

3. *Fear*: Very closely related to the fault-finding attitude is the barrier of fear that results from being repeatedly rejected or intimidated by negative criticism. Many husbands and wives habitually avoid communication with one another for fear of the “usual response.” The same could be said of parents and children, employees and their bosses, students and their teachers, and so on. The violent tempests that seem to explode “out of the clear blue,” shattering our most precious relationships, are often easily predictable if we care enough to learn to read the signs. One of the most important signs in gauging the soundness of personal relationships is the ease, intimacy, and openness with which communication flows. Fear paralyzes the process of good communication.

4. *Manipulation*: This is the diabolical art of getting others to think and act according to one’s own wishes without letting them know they are being controlled. It involves a total depersonalization of the manipulated individual in absolute contradiction to the teaching of Jesus, who based His entire approach to relationships on love and respect for every human being. Obviously, there can be no communication between persons when one insists on regarding the other as an object to be manipulated for egocentric reasons.

5. *Preoccupation*: The pace of life in the twentieth century causes us to forget that some things are even more important than *urgent* things. Every matter seems to be so vital and crucial in this day of instant communication and data pro-

cessing. There are few things more important, however, than a husband's relationship to his wife, or a mother's relationship to her growing children. The Word of God reflects this view of proper priorities:

*If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.<sup>28</sup>*

In my opinion, society should be as supportive as possible to the traditional family structure. Children need mothers and fathers, and a society that gears its economy and life-style in such a way as to isolate children from their parents can expect problems. The relationships of marriage and parenthood are too important to be preempted by what is merely "urgent." We simply cannot "put them on hold" while we pursue our private agendas. The price is too high!

6. *Dullness*: Boredom in a relationship is a barrier to good communication. Doing and talking about the "same old thing" will stifle a growing relationship. Fresh communication can be stimulated by sharing new experiences and discussing new ideas. Absolute predictability is poison to a healthy relationship.

We cheat ourselves and one another out of living life to the fullest because we lack a spirit of adventure. We must dare to learn new things, see new things, and do new things—not to satisfy a self-centered craving for novelty and innovation, but so that *we can talk about new things together*.

7. *Dishonesty*: There can be no trust apart from a commit-

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<sup>28</sup>Deut. 24:5.

ment to honesty. The only thing worse than no communication is the hypocrisy of dishonest communication.

### *How To Kill Quality Communication*

In addition to the aforementioned attitudes that block effective communication, there are several sure-fire techniques for nipping good communication in the bud.<sup>29</sup> Among them are the following practices:

1. *Explosive Words*: These are words and phrases that consistently arouse hurt feelings and angry responses in their “target.”

Sometimes, they are detonated accidentally by those who are innocently unaware of the impact these words will have on a particular person. More often, they are loaded and aimed with malicious intent and careful precision. They are often cruel and calculated attempts to actually “blow someone away”! Or they may represent only thoughtless inconsideration and insensitivity. Such words are usually associated with some painful past experience, unflattering personal characteristic, or persistent pattern of negative behavior:

“You still can’t keep a job, can you?”

“So when are you going to lose some weight?”

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<sup>29</sup>The author is indebted to Norman Wright for his formulation of these twelve points in his book, *An Answer To Family Communication* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1977), pp. 8-58. Wright calls these communication killers “the dirty dozen.”

“If I couldn’t do that any better than you do, I wouldn’t bother to do it at all.”

Such “explosive words” often involve gross exaggerations and sweeping generalizations that would be instantly recognized and rejected as overstatements by any objective person. Unfortunately, the target of these inflammatory remarks is rarely in a position to be objective. It is difficult to remain coolly neutral in the face of what appears to be a direct personal attack:

“You’re *always* late.”

“You *never* do *anything* right.”

It is highly ironic that a famous comedienne, known for her stinging sarcasm and stabbing insults, should also open her monologue with the quip, “Can we talk?”

2. *Silence*: Perhaps the most confusing of the communication killers, silence can be interpreted a number of different ways. Is she angry? Is he embarrassed, timid, or shy? Is this “the silent treatment” (a tactical maneuver in the clash of egos), or is it a mood of depression? Whatever it may mean, silence is frustrating and creates tension in relationships.

3. *Discouraging Words*: These include all indiscriminate negative remarks, fault-finding criticism, character assassination, profanity, pessimistic pronouncements, gossip, and so on.

4. *Indirect Hits*: People sometimes try to be subtle, discreet,

even diplomatic in their attacks on one another. Things are said indirectly and ambiguously.

This approach is cautious at best and cowardly at worst, attempting to inflict injury on another person without taking responsibility or risking injury to oneself in a direct frontal attack. One could think of a sniper taking verbal potshots at a sitting duck from a position of comfort and safety. Norman Wright suggests the picture of one automobile sideswiping another: the indirect, glancing blow rather than the head-on collision. Damage is done deliberately, but a total wreck is avoided:

“Some wives wouldn’t put up with a husband who was late for supper every evening.”

“Other husbands don’t have to search through the whole closet to find an ironed shirt.”

“I’d like to get some work done in this office, but I guess you just can’t get good help anymore.”

5. *Defensive Counter-complaining*: This is a kind of one-upmanship in grouchiness:

(He) “What a day I put in at the office today! I’m exhausted!”

(She) “*You* had a bad day? Ha! Do you think I’ve had a picnic here all day with these kids? You don’t know what exhaustion is! Let me tell you....”

(He) “Oh no, you don’t! Let *me* tell *you*....”

Communication never really gets off the ground in a situation like this. The only way off this treadmill is to deliberately kill one's own self-centered desire to get attention, sympathy, and/or revenge. We must release resentments, and refuse to bring up past sufferings and offenses .

In my counseling, I sometimes give people a "grace period" if they are having trouble burying resentments. I tell them, "Don't bring up anything that hasn't happened within the past thirty days." From there, we remove a week at a time, until even what happened yesterday is off limits, as far as sulking and complaining are concerned.

In Christ, we have both the motive and the method for dealing with the problem of unforgiveness.<sup>30</sup> In Christ, God has provided forgiveness for all of our failures past, present, and future. He expects us to respond by forgiving one another, and by absorbing in ourselves the pain of others' sins against us, as God in Christ forgave our sins against Himself.<sup>31</sup>

There is a way off the carousel of counter-complaint, a way out of the revolving door of resentment. It is the way of death to self-centeredness by living in continuous communication with God in Christ.

6. *Emotional Outbursts*: These must be distinguished from the natural and healthy experiences of emotion which should

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<sup>30</sup>Read carefully Matt. 18:21-35; Luke 17:1-10; Eph. 4:32; 2 Cor. 5:14-17; Col. 3:13.

<sup>31</sup>Read 1 Peter 2:21-25.

be felt and shared among human beings. Whining, whimpering, screaming, dramatic crying, and any other displays of emotion that are irresponsible, manipulative, dishonest, or in any way self-centered are detrimental to good communication. Intense displays of emotional theatrics, especially to “vent anger” or evoke sympathy, have nothing to do with a sincere desire to love and understand another person. Such eruptions are essentially self-indulgent.

7. *Duplex Disclosures*: Norman Wright calls them “double level messages.” The idea is that one message is spoken, while another is really intended. Often, the dichotomy of what is said and what is really meant becomes obvious by the behavior that accompanies or follows the words. Dishonesty is usually involved here, and sarcasm is frequently employed:

(He) “Could we postpone that visit to your mother’s so I could go hunting this weekend?”

(She) “Sure. Why should I care?”

Often, these duplex communications are a manipulative ploy, as when one “fishes” for compliments:

“What did you think of my presentation in class today?”

The rule here is, say what you mean and mean what you say.

8. *Evasive Eyes*: Eye contact is widely recognized as a reliable test of attentiveness and honesty. Husband and wives,

parents and children, lawyers and defendants, politicians and poker players have long relied upon the eyes as a gateway to knowing the soul—the unseen inner person. If you can say something to a person while looking him or her directly “in the eye,” you are either telling the truth, or you are an accomplished liar. All body language is important in communication, for our posture and facial expression can either compliment or contradict our words.

We must care enough to convey a sincere interest in others when we speak to them, and especially when we address someone whom we are tempted to take for granted. Christ does not allow our familiarity to breed contempt. Put down your book or your newspaper and look at the person with whom you are supposed to be communicating. None of our spoken words are powerful enough to do without the support of eye contact—not even the words, “I love you.”

9. *Surrogate Speaking*: Speaking for others, rather than allowing others to speak for themselves, is a habit that conveys the impression of being an obnoxious, arrogant know-it-all whether or not that impression is true. Such a person seems to presume a better knowledge of what is in our minds than we ourselves have! Interrupting, finishing sentences for others, and other “mind reading” tactics are hazardous to healthy communication.

10. *Surplus Speaking*: Most people talk too much and listen too little. The desire to dominate the conversation may stem from personal insecurity. To compensate for this sense of inadequacy, power over others is exercised by monopolizing the situation and by refusing to “yield the floor.” Surplus speaking may also take the form of constant nagging, a fault

which may occur in either husband or wife—or both! Often, the one who nags is unaware of this tendency in himself or herself, even while in the act of nagging. The victim however, is usually able to identify the offense almost immediately. Obviously, communication and mutual understanding suffer in any “surplus speaking” situation.

11. *Inconsiderate Speaking*: In wartime, we were told that “loose lips sink ships.” Lips that speak without first thinking of the impact of their words can also sink *relationships*! Carelessness and thoughtlessness in the use of words occurs most frequently in the context of close relationships (particularly family) and high emotions (especially anger):

“You’re just like your mother.”

Someone has said, “Choose your words tastefully; you may have to eat them someday”! If we will only think before we speak, we may never have to dine on our words. Once words have escaped our lips, they cannot really be taken back; they become a part of the history of our relationships, for better or worse. We can regret, confess, apologize, and recant. We can be forgiven and reconciled. But words change people and relationships in a permanent way. They can significantly influence future interaction and communication with others. One final thought: If need be, it is better to swallow our pride and eat our words than to starve for lack of loving relationships.

12. *Not Listening*: Here is the ultimate communication killer. As long as we believe that the other person is willing to take us seriously enough to hear us out, we will continue to try to communicate. But only the most compulsive talker will go

on speaking after the yawns, sighs, wandering eyes, and folded arms have clearly said: “Will you please hurry up and finish so that I can talk? I’m really not the least bit interested in what you have to say.”

### ***Wisdom And Understanding***

The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament offers us the keys to living fulfilled human lives in a world created and sustained by the Lord. How should life be lived to its fullest potential in His world? God has built certain laws into His world which a “wise” person will respect so that he or she may enjoy the most abundant life possible in this present world. The Book of Proverbs starts by telling us that true wisdom must begin by respecting God and His ways:

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.*<sup>32</sup>

To live life abundantly, we must live it *understandingly*. God is the Source and Giver of wisdom and understanding:

*By wisdom the LORD laid the earth’s foundations, by understanding he set the heavens in place....*<sup>33</sup>

Proverbs has much to say about living a life of understanding, especially as regards human relationships and good communication:

*He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.*<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Prov. 1:7. <sup>33</sup>Prov. 3:19. Compare James 1:5f.

<sup>34</sup>Prov. 18:13.

*The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.<sup>35</sup>*

*Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him.<sup>36</sup>*

*A man who lacks judgment derides his neighbor, but a man of understanding holds his tongue.<sup>37</sup>*

*A patient man has great understanding, but a quick-tempered man displays folly.<sup>38</sup>*

The ultimate embodiment of the Wisdom of God was realized in the incarnation of the God-Man, Jesus Christ.<sup>39</sup> He and His inspired apostles and prophets gave even clearer, deeper insight into the meaning of being understanding in human relationships:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”<sup>40</sup>*

*“The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For*

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<sup>35</sup>Prov. 18:17.   <sup>36</sup>Prov. 29:20.   <sup>37</sup>Prov. 11:12.

<sup>38</sup>Prov. 14:29.   <sup>39</sup>See Col. 1:15-17. Compare Prov. 8:13-36; see also John 1:1-3, 14, 18; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 2:3; Matt. 12:42-43.

<sup>40</sup>Matt. 5:43-48. Compare Rom. 12:14, 17-21; 1 Thess. 5:15.

*by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”<sup>41</sup>*

*You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.<sup>42</sup>*

*Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.<sup>43</sup>*

*Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body....Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.<sup>44</sup>*

*...make my joy complete by being likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus....<sup>45</sup>*

*My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.<sup>46</sup>*

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<sup>41</sup>Matt. 12:35-37.

<sup>42</sup>Rom. 2:1. Compare Matt. 7:1-5.

<sup>43</sup>Eph. 4:15.

<sup>44</sup>Eph. 4:25, 29-32. Compare Col. 3:8-17.

<sup>45</sup>Phil. 2:2-5.

<sup>46</sup>James 1:19-20. Compare James 3:9-10.

## *Levels Of Communication*

Deep relationships cannot grow in the soil of shallow communication. John Powell, noted teacher and author in the field of human relationships, identifies five levels of communication.<sup>47</sup> Listed in order of depth, from shallowest to deepest, the levels are as follows:

Level 5: *Cliche Conversation*: This is the most superficial level of communication. It consists of trivial, conventional word patterns to which no reply is necessary:

“How are you?”

“Have a nice day.”

No real personal sharing takes place. Both personalities remain hidden behind their ego defenses.

Level 4: *Factual Reporting*: In the words of “Dragnet’s” Sergeant Joe Friday, this level of communication offers “just the facts,” and “nothing but the facts.” No personal revelations are offered; no personal responses or commentaries are included. The content of the message is carefully restricted to “who, what, where, when, and how.” No personal disclosures are shared, and none are invited.

“There’s a sale on auto accessories going on at K-Mart.”

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<sup>47</sup>John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* (Valencia, CA: Tabor Publishing, ©1969), pp. 54-62. Used by permission.

“It’s supposed to rain tomorrow.”

**Level 3: *Personal Ideas and Judgements*:** At this stage, real self disclosure begins to take place:

“I don’t think there’s much good music being made today.”

“If he wins this election, this state’s going to be in better shape.”

This is only the threshold of real personal sharing. At the first sign of disagreement or disinterest, the process will usually revert back into lower levels of communication, or (worse) the speaker will compromise his or her integrity.

**Level 2: *Personal Feelings and Emotions*:** A deeper level of self revelation occurs when an individual shares his or her highly personal feelings and emotions. These are the passions and sentiments that are uniquely our own, that set us apart from others as distinct individuals and that motivate our deepest convictions.

**Level 1: *Complete Personal Openness and Emotional Honesty*:** This is a consistent commitment to (though not a constant experience of) complete personal oneness. It is frequently enjoyed in genuine intimate friendships, and should be the normal state of every marriage relationship. It is a deep sharing in the concerns and emotional life of another person. “Empathy” is the best single word to describe this level of communication. Because we are still living in a fallen world, this empathy will not be experienced perfectly in any rela-

tionship. It is, however, essential for us to experience this level of identification with others in some real way, in the context of our most intimate personal relationships.

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another.*<sup>48</sup>

*Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn...I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me.*<sup>49</sup>

The essence of the mind of Christ is a readiness to freely share in the lives of others; to bear their burdens; to identify with their problems; to make their concerns one's own. It is a willingness to give up exclusive claims to oneself, to share oneself with others on whatever level is needed and appropriate.

### ***Is It Worth The Risk?***

Obviously, there is a risk factor involved in opening oneself up for deeper communication. We are no longer seeking security in a cocoon of silent self-centeredness. We become vulnerable to the problems, pains, concerns, misunderstanding, and reactions of other people. At the same time, the relationships in our lives become rich with beauty and meaning. We escape from the prison of self-absorption. Losing our lives, we find them. We become like the One who deliberately made our predicament His very own, and whose life among us communicates the heart of God:

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<sup>48</sup>Rom. 12:15-16.

<sup>49</sup>Gal. 4:14-15. Compare Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1.

*Surely, he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.<sup>50</sup>*

To whatever extent we close the door of communication, to whatever degree we withdraw ourselves from God-ordained human relationships by shutting others out of our lives, we cheat ourselves out of the abundant life that God has revealed to us in Christ. God came to us in Christ to establish the basis and means for beautiful and truthful relationships with Himself and fellow human beings. *His understanding love is the key.*

May we grow to fully appreciate the value of personal relationships: They are what life is really all about. If we do not come to this understanding, we will be doomed to lives of emptiness, superficiality, and loneliness—even in the midst of a bustling city or a busy family. Somewhere along the line, someone is going to have to risk being open, honest, and vulnerable. Someone is going to have to make the first move out of ego's protective shell and into the light of love.

In Christ, God has already risked full disclosure of Himself, thus opening the door to right relationships with God and our fellow human beings. He is waiting for each one of us to walk through the door that He has provided in Christ. He is not

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<sup>50</sup>Isa. 53:4-6. Compare Acts 8:26-35; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 2:9; 1 Peter 2:24.

expecting us to exhaustively understand one another; much less does God expect that we will completely comprehend His love. But on the basis of what He has clearly revealed in Christ, He expects us to walk through the open door of right relationships and real communication that He has provided.

***We don't have to  
understand everything  
in order to  
be understanding.***

## Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Gen. 1:1ff .....	99	<b>9:59-60</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>Deut. 24:5</b> .....	<b>114</b>	<b>10:41-42</b> .....	<b>110</b>
<b>Prov. 1:7</b> .....	<b>122</b>	12:41-46 .....	112
<b>3:19</b> .....	<b>122</b>	14:25-27 .....	101
8:13-36 .....	123	17:1-10 .....	118
<b>11:12</b> .....	<b>123</b>	John 1:1-3, 10 .....	99
<b>14:29</b> .....	<b>123</b>	1:1-3, 14, 18 .....	123
<b>18:13</b> .....	<b>122</b>	3:16 .....	102
<b>18:17</b> .....	<b>123</b>	8:31ff.....	100
<b>29:20</b> .....	<b>123</b>	9:39-41 .....	100
Isa. 6:5 .....	100	12:23-26 .....	101
<b>Isa. 53:4-6</b> .....	<b>128</b>	17:5, 24 .....	99
Dan. 9:4ff .....	100	Acts 8:26-35 .....	128
Dan. 10:12 .....	100	<b>Rom. 2:1</b> .....	<b>124</b>
<b>Matt. 3:7, 13-14</b> .....	<b>100</b>	6:1ff.....	101
<b>5:43-48</b> .....	<b>123</b>	7:24 .....	100
<b>6:24</b> .....	<b>110</b>	9:1-3 .....	127
<b>6:31-33</b> .....	<b>110</b>	10:1 .....	127
7:1-5.....	111,124	12:14, 17-21 .....	123
10:37-39 .....	101	<b>12:15-16</b> .....	<b>127</b>
<b>11:15</b> .....	<b>97</b>	<b>14:9-13</b> .....	<b>111</b>
<b>12:35-37</b> .....	<b>124</b>	16:25-27 .....	99
12:42-43 .....	52	1 Cor. 1:30.....	123
13:9, 13-17, 43 .....	97	2:6-10 .....	99
16:24-25 .....	101	8:5-6 .....	99
18:21-35 .....	118	<b>14:19</b> .....	<b>97</b>
21:23-32 .....	100	15:9-10 .....	100
23:1-12 .....	111	2 Cor. 5:10.....	111
23:13ff.....	100	5:14-17 .....	118
Mark 8:34-35 .....	101	5:21 .....	128
<b>Luke 5:8</b> .....	<b>100</b>	<b>Gal. 2:20</b> .....	<b>101</b>
7:36-50 .....	100	3:13 .....	128
<b>9:23-24</b> .....	<b>101</b>	<b>4:14-15</b> .....	<b>127</b>
9:44 .....	97	Eph. 1:3-14 .....	99

3:1-11 .....	99	4:11-12 .....	111
3:8 .....	100	1 Peter 1:10-12, 18-20 .....	99
<b>4:15</b> .....	<b>124</b>	2:13-3:12 .....	112
4:17-24 .....	101	2:21-25 .....	118
<b>4:25, 29-32</b> .....	<b>124</b>	2:24 .....	128
4:29 .....	97	3:7 .....	95
4:32 .....	118	3:15 .....	97
5:4 .....	97	2 Peter 1:4 .....	100
5:21-6:9 .....	112	<b>1 John 3:16</b> .....	<b>102</b>
<b>Phil 2:2-5</b> .....	<b>124</b>	<b>4:7-8</b> .....	<b>102</b>
3:7-11 .....	101	4:9-11 .....	102
Col. 1:15-17.....	99,123	Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29 .	97
1:24-27 .....	99	3:6, 13, 22 .....	97
2:3 .....	123	4:11 .....	99
3:1-11 .....	101		
3:8-17 .....	124		
3:13 .....	118		
3:17-4:1 .....	112		
<b>3:19, 21</b> .....	<b>112</b>		
<b>4:6</b> .....	<b>97</b>		
1 Thes. 5:15 .....	123		
<b>1 Tim. 1:15</b> .....	<b>100</b>		
2 Tim. 1:8-10 .....	99		
Titus 1:1-3 .....	99		
<b>1:7</b> .....	<b>112</b>		
Heb. 1:1-3 .....	99		
2:9 .....	128		
11:3 .....	99		
James 1:5f .....	122		
<b>1:19-20</b> .....	<b>98,124</b>		
2:12-13 .....	111		
3:9-10 .....	124		
<b>4:1-3</b> .....	<b>100</b>		

How does it feel  
When people misunderstand  
What you're trying to say with all your heart?  
How do you feel  
When people don't take the time  
To be sensitive and really care?

Well, sometimes you feel lonely  
And that's understood  
And sometimes  
You might just have to cry.  
Oh, but you're not the only suffering soul  
I'm standing here hurting with you!

Oh, dear friend of mine  
You've come to be loved  
And I'll tell you the truth  
You've found the right place!  
I've walked in your shoes  
And I feel what you feel  
You've given me your trust  
And I will not betray you.

You've got to lift up your eyes  
And look beyond this old world  
To the personal God that you love.  
Gaze into His eyes and  
Lay back in His arms  
He cares for you  
More than you know.

But sometimes, you feel lonely  
And that's understood  
And sometimes  
You might just have to cry.  
Oh, but you're not the only suffering soul  
He's standing here hurting with you!  
Yes, He's standing here hurting with you!

Keith Luker, *Standin' Here Hurtin'* 1988





**Being  
Accepting**

*Receiving One Another*

***“Accept one another,  
then, just as Christ  
accepted you,  
in order to  
bring praise  
to God.”***

# Being Accepting

## *Life, Living, And Acceptance*

From infancy, through childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood, we are continually involved in interpreting and adjusting to reality. In this process of personal growth, some of us are faced with greater handicaps and challenges than are others. There are, however, certain inevitabilities with which all of us must come to terms, death and taxes being the most infamous.

Life's pressures and demands can become so heavy that some of us are tempted to simply "opt out," refusing to accept the daily load of responsibilities and problems that life lays on our doorsteps. Drunkenness, drug abuse, divorce, and suicide are only a few of the more popular ways that many are choosing as they turn away from life's relationships and responsibilities.

*"Make The World Go Away...."*

I write to encourage those who have discovered how tiring and difficult it may be to walk the straight and narrow every day. Circumstances can batter us until we are almost senseless. A consistent commitment to "doing the right thing" may become quite burdensome. Yet, Jesus Christ calls us to

follow Him in embracing not only the personal responsibilities and challenges which God places before us, but also the problems and concerns of others:

*Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."<sup>1</sup>*

I write also to encourage those who have fallen beneath the load that life has laid upon them. The circumstances of our lives are in the hand of the all compassionate King of the Universe, who works all things after the counsel of His own will.<sup>2</sup> If life has given us a burden too heavy to bear, perhaps it is only that we might learn to cast it upon God. There is no Atlas except Christ. The shoulders that bore the sin of the world to Calvary's cross are the only shoulders broad enough to carry all of our personal concerns and human problems:

*"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."<sup>3</sup>*

### ***The Dilemma Of Acceptance***

The real crux of the issue of acceptance is this: There are

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<sup>1</sup>Mark 8:34.

<sup>2</sup>See Ps. 139:1-16; Isa. 46:10; Rom. 8:28-39; 9:16-24; Eph. 1:11.

<sup>3</sup>Matt. 11:28-30. Compare Matt. 6:19-34; Luke 12:22-34; Phil. 4:6, 19; 1 Peter 5:7.

certain realities that we must accept, whether we choose them or not; there are certain responsibilities that we freely choose and know we ought to accept. *Apart from God*, we don't have the resources to accept life's inevitabilities and obligations. We should, we must—we can't!

The modern English word “accept” and its biblical Greek equivalent (*lambano*) share common basic usages:

1. a: to receive willingly....b: to be able or designed to take.
2. a: to give admittance or approval to.
3. a: to endure without protest or reaction.
4. a: to make a favorable response to.<sup>4</sup>

The common denominator in all these shades of meaning is that of *personal responsibility in a relationship*. Something is being held out to me; something (or someone) is being submitted for my personal examination and response. How can I properly “receive” what is offered? How will I be able to “endure” this person or situation “without protest” or critical reaction?

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who endured the horrors of a Nazi concentration camp, learned a monumental truth from his terrible experience: People can endure almost anything as long as they maintain a sense of purpose. Life's circumstances and relationships become overwhelming and unbearable when we no longer have any reasonable assurance that

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<sup>4</sup>*Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1983), p. 48. Compare standard Greek lexicons.

they are meaningful. Job, the patriarch, maintained personal integrity throughout his painful ordeal because he knew the God who permitted calamity to befall him, though neither Job nor his friends could understand God's reasons:

*"Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him...."*<sup>5</sup>

God does not offer us exhaustive, detailed explanations for every experience He allows life to present to us. Rather, He has clearly revealed His steadfast love and His glorious eternal purpose in Christ. On the basis of that clear revelation, God expects us to trust Him and to accept whatever cup He may place in our hands.<sup>6</sup> He is the God who brought forth the universe out of nothing, order out of chaos, life out of death, glory out of humiliation.<sup>7</sup> And He wants to bring us to wholeness through brokenness, because there is no other way to wholeness in a broken world.

### ***The Difficulty Of Acceptance***

Acceptance hasn't always been the problem it is today. There was a time when the will of God and the will of man coexisted in a harmonious relationship of mutual love and trust. Man lived in a paradise and was content with life as it came to him from the hand of his loving Creator. Hadn't God provided every physical necessity and aesthetic delight that made life so wonderful for man? Even his own female counterpart had been lovingly fashioned by the Creator from the man's flesh and bone. The human problem of acceptance began when the Serpent suggested that perhaps God had been

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<sup>5</sup>Job 13:15.      <sup>6</sup>See 2 Tim. 1:12. Compare Rom. 5:1-8; 8:28-39; Heb. 2:5-10, 14-15; 12:7-11.      <sup>7</sup>See Rom. 4:17-25.

holding out on our first parents; maybe His provisions were inadequate?

*Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.<sup>8</sup>*

The Tempter's strategy accomplished its destructive objective with deadly accuracy and precision. Seeds of doubt were sown; discontentment was cultivated; desire was inflamed; disobedience was produced; death and discord were harvested in abundance.<sup>9</sup> From that point on, human history (both individual and collective) has been a painful, frustrating cycle of nonacceptance, with all its unhappy results: discontentment, insecurity, self-assertion, confusion, conflict, and death.

We find it difficult to accept our location, our vocation, our

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<sup>8</sup>Gen. 3:1-6. Compare James 1:13-15; 1 John 2:15-17.

<sup>9</sup>A careful reading of Gen. 3:7ff reveals the immediate alienations and separations that resulted from the first sin: *spiritual* (man in relation to God), *psychological* (in relation to personal conscience and awareness), *social* (in relation to fellow human beings), and *environmental* (in relation to man's physical body and natural environment).

station, our position, our situation, our limitations. We pronounce ourselves “unacceptable” in every category, from sex appeal to income level, from golf score to I.Q. rating. Beneath all the discontentment with our lot in life, there lies a nonacceptance of our very persons. No self-improvement psychology or “power of positive thinking” can ever finally resolve the underlying problem of self-acceptance, for the problem is not merely psychological (though it has psychological symptoms). Our problem is ultimately spiritual, and our attempts to *make* ourselves acceptable only aggravate the situation.<sup>10</sup>

### ***The True Basis Of Acceptance***

The acceptance of total reality for each one of us must begin with an acceptance of one’s own particular self. The true basis of a person’s self-acceptance must be God’s acceptance of each of us, as individuals. But several misconceptions must be corrected before we proceed further.

True self-acceptance is *not* “selfism,” or egoism. Neither is it merely wishful thinking or psychological repression. Rather, it is an honest, soul-searching confrontation with ourselves as we really are, insofar as we are able to clearly see ourselves in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We must come to see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ the God-Man, and frankly confess that we fall short of that glory.

*“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”<sup>11</sup>*

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<sup>10</sup>See Rom. 7:21-24. <sup>11</sup>Isa. 6:5. Compare John 12:37-41.

*When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"<sup>12</sup>*

*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.<sup>13</sup>*

*...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...<sup>14</sup>*

God created us in His own image that we might reflect His glory. In our self-centeredness, we departed from right relationships with God and our fellow human beings; we have sinned and no longer express the original high purpose for which God created us. We are burdened with a sense of guilt, some of which is merely psychological confusion and some of which is authentic, objective guilt. But whether based on false guilt or true guilt, all self-rejection stems from the fact that we are not what we were meant to be; we have all failed to measure up to God's standard of flawlessly right relationships. Since one's self is the most immediate element in anyone's personal perception of reality, it is crucial that a rational and realistic basis be found for accepting that self; otherwise, acceptance cannot be extended to other people and external circumstances.

The Man we know historically as Jesus of Nazareth tran-

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<sup>12</sup>Luke 5:8.

<sup>13</sup>1 John 1:5-8.

<sup>14</sup>Rom. 3:23. Compare 2 Cor. 4:6.

scends history. He has *always* perfectly reflected the image of God the Father.<sup>15</sup> He entered human history to make our human nature what God had originally intended it to be. Our human nature was combined with God's nature by the incarnation of God in Christ.<sup>16</sup> By His sinless life, atoning death, and glorious triumph over the grave, Jesus has forever reconciled God and man within Himself.<sup>17</sup> God has decreed that anyone who will respond in obedient trust to this divine work of reconciliation is *justified by faith in Christ*.<sup>18</sup> All offenses against God and man are forgiven by God in Christ. Justified means that, in His Son Jesus Christ, God regards me "just as if I'd never sinned": I am restored to right relationships again. I am accepted. This Good News of what God has done for us in Christ is the true basis of self-acceptance. The challenge of faith is to personally accept God's acceptance of oneself in Christ (both initially and moment by moment), and then to extend that acceptance to all the situations and people in one's life.

*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them....God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*<sup>19</sup>

### ***Accepting Your Circumstances***

In the biblical account of the Fall, it is clear that God had

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<sup>15</sup>See 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15f; Heb. 1:3.

<sup>16</sup>See Rom. 1:1-4; 8:1-4; Phil. 2:5-8f.

<sup>17</sup>See 1 Cor. 15:47-49; Heb. 2:5-18.

<sup>18</sup>Read carefully Acts 10:34-43; 13:38-39; Rom. 3:21-30.

<sup>19</sup>2 Cor. 5:18-19, 21. Compare Rom. 5:1-11; Eph. 2:1-22; Col. 1:19-23.

provided abundantly for the man and the woman. Moreover, in His test of man's love and trust toward Himself, God allowed the maximum and forbade the minimum:

*And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."<sup>20</sup>*

As we have seen, the Destroyer's strategy was simply to lead the First Pair into an attitude of discontentment with God's provisions and nonacceptance of His prohibitions. Acceptance of our circumstances in life is still one of the greatest spiritual challenges we face. A relationship of love and trust toward God depends upon accepting the circumstances He provides. Yet, how few of us really accept the circumstances and limitations God has imposed on our sexuality, physical appearance, bodily health, financial status, family background, age, and personal abilities! "I never asked to be born" is a frequently heard protest, often used to rationalize irresponsible behavior.

"Sex change" operations and sexual perversions demonstrate an underlying rejection of one's true, God-given sexual identity. Suicide speaks of the failure or refusal to come to terms with the fact of one's own existence as a *unique* creation of God. Nonacceptance of God-given circumstances is a Satanic philosophy, an egocentric attitude which not only keeps us out of heaven, but even makes this present life a "hell on earth":

*And the angels who did not keep their positions of authority but*

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<sup>20</sup>Gen. 2:16-17.

*abandoned their own home—these he has kept in darkness....*<sup>21</sup>

This philosophy of egocentric control over our circumstances, rather than trusting the Lord to order our steps, has plunged the human race into misery and ruin ever since the Fall. “You will be like God” is still a powerful incentive. It is the motivation behind every manifestation of evil in our world, from the scientist’s attempt to genetically re-make mankind into his own image, to the modern revival of occult mysticism and magic: the New Age philosophy. In contrast, the Bible teaches that we will become like God only when we become like Christ:

*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient [submissive; accepting the Father’s will-L.D.] to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name....*<sup>22</sup>

### ***Accepting The Unexpected***

Life seems to consist of a curious mixture of order and chaos. There are predictable patterns that give us a sense of security (such as the cycles of days, weeks, months, seasons, and years). There are also abrupt and unexpected disruptions, delays, disasters, and changes that interrupt the usual flow of events in our lives. Job transfers, surprise parties, financial

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<sup>21</sup>Jude 6. Compare 2 Peter 2:4. Jesus recognized Satan’s philosophy in Peter’s rejection of the cross that God had appointed for Him (Matt. 16:21-23).

<sup>22</sup>Phil 2:6-9.

windfalls and setbacks, heart attacks and cancer, tragedies and emergencies—these are only a few of the unexpected elements that make our lives not only “interesting,” but exciting—even stressful. The most distressing interruptions with which we must deal in life are those which mark a permanent and irreversible loss: foreclosure on a home; dismissal from a job; divorce from one’s spouse; death.

### ***The Ultimate Interruption***

This last interruption—the ultimate disruption of life—is, of course, the most distressing of all. This is especially so when death comes unexpectedly: prematurely, accidentally, or violently. I cannot even begin to discuss the heartbreak, the crushing sense of grief and anguish that engulfs those who must pick up the pieces of their shattered lives after the death of a loved one. Nor can I adequately convey the sense of utter frustration, loneliness, and fearful anxiety with which the terminally ill and the dying must struggle.

As one who has personally encountered death at close range more than once, I am convinced that only those who have truly faced death can speak with deep understanding to the dying, and to their survivors. Others may sympathize and help in different ways, but each of us must die his or her own death. We can, however, draw strength and encouragement from those who have faced death triumphantly in Christ.<sup>23</sup> Above all, we can learn from the Man who tasted death for every man, whose death was so lowly and common, yet so

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<sup>23</sup>See 2 Peter 1:12-15 (compare John 21:18-23); 2 Tim. 4:6-8, 16-18 (compare Phil. 1:19-26; 2 Cor. 1:8-11).

glorious and unique.<sup>24</sup> How did Jesus face death?

*They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." He took Peter, James and John along with Him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."<sup>25</sup>*

William Barclay once remarked that nobody wants to die; nobody wants to die at only thirty-three years of age; and nobody wants to die by slow torture. Jesus, the Man, faced all of this with anguish—yet, with acceptance.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Dealing With Interruptions***

There are at least three possible responses to life's major and minor interruptions. Most commonly, interruptions are received *resentfully*. Irritation and anger are usually involved. Attempts at evasion or escape are a common manifestation of resentment, taking such forms as sulking, drunkenness, aggressiveness, and even suicide. Failure to accept and accommodate life's circumstances is the most common source of resentment. This attitude of unyielding resistance in dealing with challenging relationships and situations can only result

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<sup>24</sup>See John 16:32-33. Compare 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 2:9, 14-15; 1 Peter 1:3f; Rev. 1:17-18.

<sup>25</sup>Mark 14:32-36. Compare Heb. 5:7f; 12:1-2f.

<sup>26</sup>Jesus displayed the same attitudes of distress and acceptance in the death of His friend, Lazarus (see John 11:1-44). However, as both God and man, Jesus emphatically refused to accept death as man's natural and ultimate end.

in brittleness (and finally, brokenness) of spirit.

The first automobile tires were designed to resist the shock of contact with the road—and ultimately ended in shreds, cut to pieces by the indifference of the rugged terrain. Then a pneumatic tire was designed that would “roll with the punches” of the road. The resilience feature is still used in tire manufacturing. Human behavioral studies indicate that the key to a longer and more fulfilled life is not the way of resistance and resentment, but of resilience and responsiveness. Of course, there are principles that should never be compromised, evils that must never be accommodated, and conflicts that are unavoidable. But, as a basic approach to life and human relationships, the way of resistance yields only bitterness and brokenness.

At the opposite extreme, we may try to face life’s obstacles and interruptions *stoically*. Stoicism was a Greek school of philosophy which claimed that supreme wisdom was to be found in personal detachment from all human passions. Stoics commended absolute submission to both the favors and cruelties of nature. Obviously, this philosophy is opposed to the biblical view of mankind as lord of nature under a divine stewardship:

*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”<sup>27</sup>*

The Stoic’s approach to life is evident in platitudes such as:

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<sup>27</sup>Gen. 1:28. Compare Psalm 8; Heb. 2:5-9.

“Grin and bear it.”

“Stand up and take it like a man.”

“Bite the bullet.”

This fatalistic pessimism about life produces a hard, calloused breed of men and women. Life is seen as a matter of “survival of the fittest.” Compassion is weakness. Emotion is an irrational waste of time. Life is to be neither loved nor hated; it is only to be experienced and endured. Think of *Star Trek’s* Mr. Spock, and you’ll get the idea.

The way of Christ is the way of the cross. This way of dealing with life is neither rebelliously resistant nor dispassionately indifferent. It is the way of *creativity*. Christ certainly did not enjoy the cross, but neither did He merely endure it. He *used* it to accomplish the will of His heavenly Father: human salvation. Likewise, Paul did not choose for himself the chains of imprisonment; he submitted to the circumstances presented to him by the Lord of Life, *using* them to preach the gospel and strengthen the church.

*Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to every one else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly....The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.<sup>28</sup>*

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<sup>28</sup>Phil. 1:12-14, 18. Compare Acts 20:22-25.

This way of creativity has been called “making the best of a bad situation”—and let’s be honest: some situations really *are* bad! But, as Corrie ten Boom learned in a Nazi concentration camp, there is no pit on this earth so deep that God’s love cannot penetrate the darkness and despair. God lifted the Hebrew patriarch Joseph out of Pharaoh’s dungeon and set him on the throne of Egypt, second only to the Egyptian monarch himself.<sup>29</sup> He took Daniel and his three friends from a Babylonian king’s slave stable and made them high officials of the world’s mightiest empire.<sup>30</sup> And He raised up His Son, condemned by men to die a criminal’s death, and placed all things under His feet.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Fold Up, Or Fly?***

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything....Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.*<sup>32</sup>

In a world which has fallen under the power of deception, sin, and death, we cannot escape the winds of change, opposition, and disruption that break in on all of us. We find ourselves in all sorts of circumstances that we never chose, and cannot change or control. Becoming a Christian doesn’t diminish our concerns and responsibilities; indeed, we find ourselves with a deeper consciousness of the problems and

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<sup>29</sup> Read Gen. 39-47. <sup>30</sup>Read Dan. 1-2.

<sup>31</sup>See Acts 2:36; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Eph. 1:18-23; Phil 2:9-11; Heb. 2:5-9; 1 Peter 3:21-22.

<sup>32</sup>James 1:2-4, 12. Compare Rom. 5:1-5; 2 Tim. 4:1-8, 16-18; Heb. 12:1-11; 1 Peter 1:3-7; 5:10.

needs surrounding us. We are more concerned than ever to fulfill our responsibilities, and more acutely aware of the impact of our choices and decisions. Christianity is not escapism. Jesus had to carry His cross; you and I will have to carry ours—if we follow Him. The difference is that, in Christ, we are not left to struggle alone under the weight of our problems and responsibilities. Jesus will make our burden easy and our yoke light. In fact, He will make them His own. Our greatest challenge will be to leave our personal concerns to His care, and to make His concerns our top priority. God Himself will provide for our bodies and protect our souls:

*“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”<sup>33</sup>*

*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.<sup>34</sup>*

When a storm strikes, the rooster responds by wrapping its wings tightly about itself, protecting itself as best it can. The eagle, however, spreads its wings and rises above the storm. We cannot always choose the circumstantial climate in which we must live. We can, however, choose how we will respond to the climate in which we find ourselves. We can *fold up* like the rooster, withdrawing into ourselves in a futile attempt to avoid life’s storms. Or, we can *fly* like the eagle, rising above

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<sup>33</sup>Matt. 6:31-33. Compare Phil. 4:19.

<sup>34</sup>1 Cor. 10:13. Compare 1 Thess. 5:23-24; Jude 24-25.

the storms of life by seeing things from heaven's perspective, trusting in God's power and providence. Fold up, or fly—the rooster, or the eagle—which way will you choose?

### ***Accepting Relationships***

It has been said, “You can choose your friends, but not your relatives.” But that is only true in a qualified sense. In modern Western culture, it is customary for men and women to choose their own partners in life's most intimate relationship: marriage.

Of course, along with that choice comes an assortment of individuals whom we do not personally choose, but who are nonetheless part of the “package deal”: children and grandchildren (if the Lord so blesses), in-laws of all kinds (mother, father, son, daughter, brother, sister), and each spouse's collection of relatives and trusted friends from their personal pre-married lives. All of these are a part of the spouse by whom we promise to stand faithfully, “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘til by death do we part.”

Leaving all others and cleaving only to one's spouse is an important biblical principle of marriage: the “one flesh” relationship of husband and wife is exclusive of all others. However, a wedding ring is not a social tourniquet, cutting off our circulation among those whom we have known and loved.

Rivalry and interference from “outside” are not to be tolerated in a marriage relationship. On the other hand, if accept-

ing your mate “for better or for worse” means anything at all, it should include an acceptance of all the legitimate, God-given relationships in his or her life. Marriage means a blending of two individual personalities into a higher kind of unity in which individuality (not individualism) is retained by both partners, but is expressed in a relationship of self-sacrifice and sharing. And “sharing” includes accepting one another’s friends and relatives, whether or not they happen to be one’s personal “cup of tea.”

### ***Warts And All***

In Christ, God accepts me “just as I am.” He knows that only this kind of total and unqualified acceptance will motivate and empower me to become “just as He is.” The Holy Spirit, through Paul, said that “the grace of God teaches us,” but we seem to be slow learners.<sup>35</sup> God’s grace in Christ is His *activated love*, His unqualified acceptance of each Christian. Activated love *accepts*. Activated love *accepts people*. Activated love accepts people *as they are!* This acceptance does not encourage sin.<sup>36</sup> It does not imply God’s approval of everything the accepted person has done, is doing, or will yet do. Rather, this gracious, active acceptance causes us to love God, hate sin, respect ourselves, and care about others. It creates in us a desire to change, and encourages us to look to God for the power to do so. God’s acceptance of each one in Christ is the pattern after which Christians are to model all human relationships, especially those within the home and wider Christian community:

*To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you,*

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<sup>35</sup>See Titus 2:11-14. <sup>36</sup>See Rom. 6:1ff.

*leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.<sup>37</sup>*

*Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.<sup>38</sup>*

*Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us....<sup>39</sup>*

God's whole plan in Christ assumes that the transformation of character that He desires for each of us will be affected, not by the demands of sheer power and legal authority, but by the attraction of His gracious, unconditional love. He is not afraid that extending His grace and acceptance to sinners will encourage them to despise His law of love. He knows that when His love takes root in good and honest hearts, it bears the fruit of the Spirit, a harvest of holiness and love.<sup>40</sup> We tend to pre-judge others, assuming that their hearts are not good and honest, but rather, malicious and hypocritical. Even if such judgements were true (and they are almost certainly colored by our own self-centered attitudes), they are hardly expressive of the nature of Christian love:

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<sup>37</sup>1 Peter 2:21-24. Compare Matt. 5:38-48; 18:21-35; Rom. 12:14-21.

<sup>38</sup>Rom. 15:7. Compare 2 Cor. 5:14-21; 1 John 3:16; 4:7-11, 19-21.

<sup>39</sup>Eph. 4:32-5:2. Compare Col. 3:13.

<sup>40</sup>See Luke 8:4-15; Matt. 21:43; Rom. 14:17-18; Gal. 5:22-23; Heb. 6:7-8; James 3:17-18; compare Rom. 3:21-31; Gal. 2:21.

*If you love someone you will be loyal to him no matter what the cost. You will always believe in him, always expect the best of him, and always stand your ground in defending him.<sup>41</sup>*

### ***Idealism And Realism***

Love is neither naive nor cynical about human nature. Rather, it is compassionate, understanding, patient, and accepting of others. It neither ignores nor approves faults; it forgives them. As God has accepted me “just as I am” in Christ, and as I have learned to love myself as I am, so must I learn to love and accept each person God entrusts to my life. Has God’s acceptance of me (warts and all) caused me to become licentious and careless about my faults and sins? Has it not rather strengthened and encouraged me to progressively put off my sins and put on the character and conduct of Jesus? Christ’s holiness is sufficient to expose my faults. His life is an unspoken sermon of judgement on my sins; His love is a silent summons to change. I am under no misconceptions concerning Christ’s view of my sins. I am clear about the way He wants me to go. Why, then, would I think my acceptance of another human being implies that I endorse his errors, commend his faults, or approve his sins?

As C.S. Lewis put it, God doesn’t accept us because we *are* lovable; He accepts us so that we can *become* lovable. He has full-grown spiritual maturity in mind for us, but in the meanwhile, He genuinely loves and accepts us as we really are in the present. This is because His love and acceptance of us is not based upon our personal characteristics and accom-

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<sup>41</sup>1 Cor. 13:7. Paraphrased by Kenneth Taylor, *Reach Out: The Living New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Foundation, 1967).

plishments, but upon the redeeming life, death, and resurrection of His Son on our behalf. This trusted Good News of God's acceptance in Christ is able to bring about not only a change of external conduct, but a whole revolution in personal values and motives:

*But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.<sup>42</sup>*

Let us honestly ask ourselves: Does my attitude and behavior toward those closest to me speak more of Good News, or bad news?...love, or hate?...God's righteousness, or self-righteousness?...liberation, or manipulation?...sensitivity, or insensitivity? The grace of God teaches us that acceptance motivates change, and not vice versa.

*You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>43</sup>*

Love is the intent; change is only the by-product. Acceptance should never be used as a reward or inducement to bring about change in a person. Nevertheless, communicating a

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<sup>42</sup>Phil 3:7-9. Compare Matt. 13:44-46; Mark 9:35. See also my brief study of Kingdom paradoxes in *Losing Life and Finding Life* (Clifton Park, NY: Life Communications, 1988).

<sup>43</sup>Rom. 5:6-8. Compare Eph. 2:1-10; 1 Tim. 1:12-16; Titus 3:3-8.

message of personal rejection to another person will prevent the close personal contact and mutual interaction through which God works to change human lives.

### ***Acceptance And Marriage***

Let us focus our attention more closely on the necessity of acceptance in the marriage relationship, since nonacceptance often strikes closest to home. Whether a married couple is newlywed or years into their marriage, because of changes that occur in life there is an ongoing need to keep the concept of acceptance current. The marriage “engine” cannot efficiently meet today’s demands on the fumes of yesterday’s commitment. The commitment to love and accept one’s marriage partner must be renewed continuously; it is a vital aspect of the cross of Christian discipleship, which we are called to take up “daily.”<sup>44</sup>

There is a striking similarity in one’s acceptance of a marriage partner “for better or for worse,” and Christ’s attitude of acceptance toward each disciple:

*“...whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”<sup>45</sup>*

The covenant bond between Jesus and His disciples will never be broken by Christ. He will never drive us away; if the covenant is broken, it will be from our side, not His. Our personal devotion to Christ might waver; He remains steadfast.<sup>46</sup> The church is not always a beautiful bride; our apathy,

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<sup>44</sup>See Luke 9:23. <sup>45</sup>John 6:37.

<sup>46</sup>Read Jer. 2:1-4; Ezek. 16; also, the entire Book of Hosea. Compare John 3:26-30; Rom. 7:1-4; 2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:22-33; Rev. 19:7-9; 21:2, 9-14.

bickering, and worldliness can be quite ugly—even by the standards of the world! Yet Christ, “whose eyes are like blazing fire” in their ability to penetrate to the truth beneath our ecclesiastical cosmetics, continues to patiently love and accept us, even while He calls us to repent and be transformed.<sup>47</sup>

### ***The Hinderance Of The Hardened Heart***

*Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?” “Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate.” “Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?” Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning....”<sup>48</sup>*

It is no coincidence that when peoples’ hearts are hardened to God and His Word, they are also hardened toward their spouses (and vice-versa!). These rejections naturally go together but they are *unacceptable*. Whatever else acceptance may be, it is certainly *not* fatalism, complacency, resignation, compromise, or surrender to sin. God promises us power to grow out of what we’ve “always been,” and into what He wants us to be: spiritual replicas of His Son.<sup>49</sup>

I do not believe that hard-hearted hypocrisy is the greatest deterrent facing the church in its march toward spiritual

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<sup>47</sup>See Rev. 1-3.

<sup>48</sup>Matt. 19:3-8. Compare Mal. 2:13-16.

<sup>49</sup>See Rom. 8:29-30; Eph. 1:4-5; 4:20-24; Col. 3:5-11; Heb. 2:10; 1 John 3:1-3.

maturity. I believe indifference is our greatest internal enemy. Regardless of what anyone else may do, each disciple must take the Lord seriously whenever He makes a claim, grants a promise, points toward a goal, or enjoins a command. Jesus says we must grow and change into His likeness; we *must* love, forgive, and accept others “even as” He does. And He says that, by His grace, we *can!*

### ***The Hinderance Of Harshness***

*Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.  
Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them.<sup>50</sup>*

Christian wives are called to accept a submissive position in their marriage relationships. This responsibility does not hinge on the husband’s behavior, but on the wife’s higher submission to Jesus as Lord. The wife’s acceptance of this subordinate role will be challenged by such factors as her own ego and the “spirit of the age,” which finds any type of submission degrading. But I believe that the toughest hinderance wives face in accepting their God-given role in marriage is the husbands’ failure to submit to Christ in relating to their wives. I must emphasize: The wife’s responsibility does not depend on the husband’s behavior. However, the husband’s behavior goes a long way toward making his wife’s role easier or harder for her to accept and fulfill.

I confess that I have personally struggled against this tendency toward harshness, and not always successfully. In the world, I had learned to be cruel and malicious in the use of my tongue—to verbally slice, lash, and hack other people in

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<sup>50</sup>Col. 3:18-19. Compare Eph. 5:22-33.

order to hurt them. In developing this vindictive, harsh spirit, one may reach a point of almost total insensitivity to the pain he or she is inflicting upon another person. Often, there was no conscious intent to be harsh; nonetheless, people were hurt and offended. I am learning, in Christ, not only how to stop being harsh, but also how to avoid even giving the impression of harshness in relating to other people.

Insensitivity is a problem closely related to harshness, and apparently also more characteristic of men than of women. How can a husband kick his dirty boots off in the middle of the living room floor, drop his jacket in the hall on the way to the bathroom, and then complain to his wife that she is a sloppy housekeeper? Such insensitivity toward the human being with whom he is “one flesh” will not be regarded lightly by the Lord:

*Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.<sup>51</sup>*

### ***Acceptance: Unconditional And Unqualified***

The difficulty we face in learning to accept our spouses, relatives, brothers and sisters in Christ, and all others is the problem of appreciating the reality of our own acceptance before God. I use the word “appreciate” in its fullest meaning: not only to *comprehend* the basis and value of our acceptance before God, but also to be appropriately *thankful* for it. God has fully accepted each believer in Christ on the

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<sup>51</sup>1 Peter 3:7. Compare Mal. 2:13-16.

basis of Christ's perfect redemptive work: His sinless life, atoning death, and glorious resurrection.

In Christ, God accepts me without additional qualifications and conditions. My relationship with God is not a matter of reading the fine print, searching for legal loopholes, and hoping to "squeeze by" on technicalities. It is a *personal* relationship: He knows me as I really am, in all of my sins and imperfections and weaknesses. He sees me at my best and says, "It's not nearly good enough." He sees me at my worst and says, "I love you so much that I will give My Son—My very Heart—to you, so that you can be acceptable before Me."

Now I know, from intimate personal experience, the real meaning of love, forgiveness, and acceptance. I know its liberating and life-changing power. It has set me free from the slavery of self-centeredness: I can love; I can give. I can accept and forgive myself because God knows all my secrets and my sins; yet He will never stop loving me. He's proven it at Calvary! His arms are always open to forgive me as I come to Him confessing my sins, ready to make a new beginning with Him. But God insists that, if I truly know His loving acceptance in Christ, I will be willing to pass on to others the acceptance He has freely extended to me:

*"For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins."<sup>52</sup>*

*"And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against*

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<sup>52</sup>Matt. 6:14-15. Compare Matt. 6:12; 18:21-35.

*anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.”<sup>53</sup>*

*“Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little.”<sup>54</sup>*

Husband, accept your wife as God accepts her in Christ: with all of her frustrating frustrations, irrational fears, unexplainable tears, and incomprehensible “logic” that no man can seem to understand. Wife, accept your husband in all of his Neanderthal boorishness and insensitivity. Christian, accept your brothers and sisters in the Lord, with all their hang-ups, idiosyncracies, personal convictions, and individual peculiarities. Accept them all, each one, as God has accepted them—and you—in Christ Jesus.

### ***Acceptance, If?***

*Conditional* love and *qualified* acceptance have nothing to do with life in Christ. They have no role in a Christian marriage. It is no coincidence that, as our culture moves farther from its biblical foundations, adultery has become a way of life, divorce rates soar, and traditional life-long marriage relationships are an endangered species. This is because unconditional love and unqualified acceptance are unknown outside of God’s revelation of Himself in His Word.

The traditional marriage vows, based on Christian love,

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<sup>53</sup>Mark 11:25. Compare 1 Peter 3:7. According to ancient tradition, Peter was Mark’s primary source of information about Jesus. Jesus’ teaching that our attitude toward others directly influences the efficacy of our prayers is echoed in Peter’s admonition to husbands.

<sup>54</sup>Luke 7:47.

called for commitment to the covenant relationship and to one's spouse "for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til by death do we part." Many people today are writing their own "marriage contract," complete with highly individualized demands, stipulations, and qualifications that represent a total repudiation of the biblical view of marriage. Our whole society is paying the price for these innovations: weak families, broken homes, delinquent children, and domestic violence.

Each of us, as husbands and wives, must seriously consider our own position and responsibility. Do I accept my spouse with a big "*IF*," or do I accept her/him with "no strings attached," no fine print escape clause, no qualifications and conditions tacked on to my original vows of love and loyalty? Perhaps he is no longer the sensitive, charming Romeo that once "swept her off her feet" (if indeed he ever really was). Maybe her face and figure no longer retain the youthful beauty that originally caught his eye. Now what? How can one continue to accept a marriage partner as she/he changes (or fails to change) with the passing of time?

I have seen women whose psychological health has been smashed to pieces on the rocky shores of their good intentions and dashed hopes for their husbands. "I know there are some things about him that I can't stand, but I'm sure I can change him eventually." Incompatibility should be taken seriously *before* entering into marriage so that it may never be offered as an excuse for divorce. It is deceitful to enter into a contract with undisclosed intentions; it is dishonest to break the vows that we freely took upon ourselves when we entered into marriage. Marriage deserves a serious "look" before a decision is made to "leap."

I have seen another evil under the sun: a man accepts a woman to be his wife as he would accept a precious gift from the hand of God. But when the gift has been opened and has become tarnished with years and disheveled from life's inevitable "wear and tear," the present is neglected, perhaps even abused—and eventually thrown out in favor of a glittering trinket. But a gift from God is still a gift from God, whether or not it is still in its original wrapping. Men must learn to get beyond the external wrapping, and view their wives with spiritual eyes that can appreciate the inner qualities of true womanhood; and let wives learn to cultivate that inner beauty, because they will not always retain the outward beauty of youth:

*Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight.<sup>55</sup>*

### ***Be Accepting!***

Human beings are free moral agents. We are not merely the products of genetic programming and environmental conditioning. We can reason and choose to adopt or abandon the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior patterns that are presented to us. This is not to deny that there is a certain amount of conditioning to overcome in each person's search for abundant life. I would urge you, the individual reader, to choose the way of acceptance for the following reasons:

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<sup>55</sup>1 Peter 3:3-4. Compare 2 Cor. 4:16-18.

1. *“Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord”*:<sup>56</sup> Circumstance is not lord; Jesus is Lord of all of our circumstances.

2. *Joy and peace come from acceptance*: If we will not accept what we cannot change, we are doomed to lives of frustration, resentment, and anxiety.

3. *Acceptance of what has really happened is the first step to overcoming the consequences of any tragedy*: Denial is a normal reaction to traumatic experiences and losses, but healing begins with acceptance of the present reality.

4. *It is not what one has lost, but what one has left that must now take priority*: Responsibilities continue in the present situation; the present moment matters. By God’s grace, we can pick up the pieces that tragedy has shattered and begin to rebuild our lives.

5. *By making adjustments to the limitations and changes of the new situation, you can live your life to its fullest potential in this world, in God’s care and under His control*.

6. *No matter who you are or what has happened to you, God is faithful*: In Jesus Christ, you are more than a conqueror:

*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life,*

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<sup>56</sup>Rom. 14:8.

*neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*<sup>57</sup>

7. *I may not know all the answers, but I know God's hand is involved in every detail of my life:* We should not expect to escape from the adversities of life in a fallen world. Our Lord was not immune from tragedy and pain; the slave is not above his master. We can, however, accept any cup from the hand of the Lord of Life, for his loving purpose toward us is clearly revealed in Christ:

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.*<sup>58</sup>

8. *The omnipotent Creator of the universe is our loving Father:* "I may not know what the future holds, but I know Him who holds the future." And He is *my* Father!

When no immediate answer to life's many problems is forthcoming, *be accepting*, for acceptance develops trust, dependence, and patience in the human character. Receive, with humble consent, the people and circumstances that God provides, for He is preparing for each of us a life of incomparable meaning and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, His Son.

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<sup>57</sup>Rom. 8:35-39.

<sup>58</sup>Rom. 8:28-29; compare Pss. 46:9-10; 139:1-16; Eph. 1:9-11.

*God grant me the serenity  
To accept the things  
I cannot change,  
The courage  
To change the things I can,  
And the wisdom  
To know the difference.<sup>59</sup>*

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<sup>59</sup>*Serenity Prayer* (Anonymous)

## Scripture Index

(Passages quoted in the text are in boldface type.)

Gen. <b>1:28</b> .....	149	13:38-39 .....	144
<b>2:16-17</b> .....	145	20:22-25 .....	150
<b>3:1-6</b> .....	141	Rom. 1:1-4 .....	144
3:7ff .....	141	3:21-30 .....	144
Ch. 39-47 .....	151	3:21-31 .....	155
<b>Job 13:15</b> .....	140	<b>3:23</b> .....	143
Ps. 8 .....	149	4:17-25 .....	140
46:9-10 .....	167	5:1-5 .....	151
139:1-16.....	138,167	5:1-8 .....	140
<b>Isaiah 6:5</b> .....	142	5:1-11 .....	144
46:10 .....	138	<b>5:6-8</b> .....	157
Jer. 2:1-4:2 .....	158	6:1ff .....	154
Ezek. 16 .....	158	7:1-4 .....	158
Dan. 1-2 .....	151	7:21-24 .....	142
Hosea .....	158	8:1-4 .....	144
Mal. 2:13-16.....	159,161	<b>8:28-29</b> .....	167
Matt. 5:38-48 .....	155	8:28-39.....	138,140
6:12 .....	162	8:29-30 .....	159
<b>6:14-15</b> .....	162	<b>8:35-39</b> .....	167
6:19-34 .....	138	9:16-24 .....	138
<b>6:31-33</b> .....	152	12:14-21 .....	155
<b>11:28-30</b> .....	138	<b>14:8</b> .....	166
13:44-46 .....	157	14:17-18 .....	155
16:21-23 .....	146	<b>15:7</b> .....	155
18:21-35.....	155,162	<b>1 Cor. 10:13</b> .....	152
<b>19:3-8</b> .....	159	<b>13:7</b> .....	156
21:43 .....	155	15:24-28 .....	151
<b>Mark 8:34</b> .....	138	15:47-49 .....	144
9:35 .....	157	2 Cor. 1:8-11 .....	147
<b>11:25</b> .....	163	4:4 .....	144
<b>14:32-36</b> .....	148	4:6 .....	143
<b>Luke 5:8</b> .....	143	4:16-18 .....	165
<b>7:47</b> .....	163	5:14-21 .....	155
8:4-15 .....	155	<b>5:18-19, 21</b> .....	144
9:23 .....	158	11:2 .....	158
12:22-34 .....	138	Gal. 2:21 .....	155
John 3:26-30 .....	158	5:22-23 .....	155
<b>6:37</b> .....	158	Eph. 1:4-5 .....	159
11:1-44 .....	148	1:9-11 .....	167
12:37-41 .....	142	1:11 .....	138
<b>16:32-33</b> .....	148	1:18-23 .....	151
21:18-23 .....	147	2:1-10 .....	157
Acts 2:36 .....	151	2:1-22 .....	144
10:34-43 .....	144	4:20-24 .....	159

<b>4:32-5:2</b> .....	<b>155</b>	2:4 .....	146
5:22-33 .....	158, 160	<b>1 John 1:5-8</b> .....	<b>143</b>
<b>Phil. 1:12-14, 18</b> .....	<b>150</b>	2:15-17 .....	141
1:19-26 .....	147	3:1-3 .....	159
2:5-8f .....	144	3:16 .....	155
<b>2:6-9</b> .....	<b>146</b>	4:7-11, 19-21 .....	155
2:9-11 .....	151	<b>Jude 6</b> .....	<b>146</b>
<b>3:7-9</b> .....	<b>157</b>	24-25 .....	152
4:6, 19 .....	138	Rev. 1:17-18 .....	148
4:19 .....	152	Ch. 1-3 .....	159
Col. 1:15f .....	144	19:7-9 .....	158
1:19-23 .....	144	21:2, 9-14 .....	158
3:5-11 .....	159		
3:13 .....	155		
<b>3:18-19</b> .....	<b>160</b>		
1 Thess. 5:23-24 .....	152		
1 Tim. 1:12-16 .....	157		
2 Tim. 1:10 .....	148		
<b>1:12</b> .....	<b>140</b>		
4:1-8, 16-18 .....	151		
4:6-8, 16-18 .....	147		
Titus 2:11-14 .....	154		
3:3-8 .....	157		
Heb. 1:3 .....	144		
2:5-9 .....	149, 151		
2:5-10, 14-15 .....	140		
2:5-18 .....	144		
2:9, 14-15 .....	148		
2:10 .....	159		
5:7f .....	148		
6:7-8 .....	155		
12:1-2f .....	148		
12:1-11 .....	151		
12:7-11 .....	140		
<b>James 1:2-4</b> .....	<b>151</b>		
<b>1:12</b> .....	<b>151</b>		
1:13-15 .....	141		
3:17-18 .....	155		
1 Peter 1:3f .....	148		
1:3-7 .....	151		
<b>2:21-24</b> .....	<b>155</b>		
<b>3:3-4</b> .....	<b>165</b>		
<b>3:7</b> .....	<b>161, 163</b>		
3:21-22 .....	151		
5:7 .....	138		
5:10 .....	151		
2 Peter 1:12-15 .....	147		

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