

Patrick A. Bucksot



**BREAK OUT
OF THE BOX**

Tearing Down the Walls
that Bind our Spirit

Break Out of the Box

Patrick Bucksot

Copyright © 2015 by Patrick Bucksot. All rights reserved worldwide. No part of this publication may be replicated, redistributed, or given away in any form without the prior written consent of the author/publisher or the terms relayed to you herein.

Patrick Bucksot,
New Bern, NC, 28560, USA

Special Thanks:

Cover image is provided by Pastor Kyle Hammond, Adventure Church, Lewis Center, OH

“I don’t know how you feel about God before reading this book, but I do know that after reading ‘Break Out of the Box,’ your perspective will change. Patrick Bucksot challenges us to let down the guards that protect our experienced, formed views of God, and allow God to show us, for Himself, who He really is. This book is both skillfully and passionately written - a must read. “

Michael Carter
Senior Pastor
The Life Church,
Bloomington, IN

Patrick Bucksot is a kingdom-thinker, a kingdom-builder; His passion is to discover and declare truths that motivate the Body of Christ to realize maximum potential. The composition you have before you is filled with kingdom-principles that promote this purpose. Read it with an open heart and ready hands.

David Pridgen
Senior Pastor
Redemption
Outreach
Christian Center
Rocky Mount,
NC

Do you always seem to be hitting a roadblock in your Christian walk? We are so often blind to what those barriers really are. Patrick Bucksot exposes and explains (on the basis of God’s Word) many of the “walls” that get between us, God and others. Read this book and break out of the box today!

Ray Lewis Senior
Pastor, Rock of
Zion
OFWB Church,
Grantsboro, NC

I found Patrick Bucksot’s book, “Break Out of the Box” to be edifying, wise, and particularly in tune with the habits of this age, which, as you say, tends to sacrifice standards in the name of “tolerance.” I particularly appreciated Patrick’s insights into the necessary waiting we must do when God is silent. I deeply resonate with the author’s call for unity on the chapter on prejudice. I was struck by the power of Patrick Bucksot’s remark about how “religion can often exalt itself above God.” “Break Out of the Box” is a good read for all believers.

– Rev. Kent Ellett,
Senior Minister
Speedway Church of
Christ Speedway, IN

-
-
-
-

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	4
Preface.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Pride: An Unstable Foundation.....	9
How Things Appear.....	12
Lack of Expectation.....	16
Crippled by Fear.....	19
An Offendable Heart.....	23
Traditions of Men.....	27
Works of Works.....	31
Lack of Discipleship.....	35
Seeking Praise.....	39
Borrowed Time.....	42
Making Excuses.....	45
Heart of Prejudice.....	48
Spiritual Astigmatism.....	52
Becoming An Island.....	55
Compromise by Tolerance.....	59
Search for Relevance.....	64
Pedigree of Man.....	68
Religious Spirit.....	72
Complacency is a Lack.....	78
Conclusion.....	83

Preface

A few years ago, I preached a message titled; *Don't Put God in a Box*. While preparing the message, the Lord showed me a cardboard box with the names of six things we use to limit Him. They were written on each side. When I get these kinds of visuals, my only hope is that I can translate what the Lord is trying to say to His people. The topics of the message included *Pride, Appearance, Lack of Expectations, Fear, Offense and Traditions*.

My box was quite an example to behold. It was an old refrigerator box that was cut down to about 1/3 of its original height. The sides were tucked into the bottom lid of the box and taped together with duct tape. While there was nothing fancy about this box, it was fitting for the message because the things that cause us to trust our own wisdom cannot compare to the glory of God.

As I preached on each topic, I would add a side to the box and slowly becoming restricted in my ability to move around the platform. As the fifth piece went into place, I became completely cut off from the freedom that the Lord desires for us to have in Him.

The thing that I did not count on was how the Lord would personally touch me in the process of this message. I was trying to convey a message from a visual that the Lord revealed to me, and although I was moved in the preparation, I still wasn't fully prepared for the outcome.

As I finished the last topic, the time had come to put the lid on the box. With the lid on, I was in complete darkness and all alone. Usually, congregations need to see the speaker to get the full impact of what they are saying, but this message was different. While some may have chuckled to themselves, others were beginning to see the impact our actions have in our relationship with the Lord.

The inside of the box was dark and cramped. This was purposefully intended to illustrate our lack of freedom. When we are in this position, we cannot walk with joy in our hearts. We cannot fully display who Christ is in us if we are confined by our own limitations. But the sad thing is this; we usually don't even realize that we are in the box.

In our lives, this is a time when we just go through the motions of our faith. We know something is out of place, but we can't quite put our finger on it. We still love God, but question His love for us. We try to do the right things, but lack the power of His presence.

So why do we go through this place of isolation so often? Why do we rely on our own wisdom to run our lives?

The real question that has to be asked is this; why do we continue to place limits on God, when we know in our hearts that He is limitless in glory and power? When the Hebrews left Egypt, by the mighty hand of God, they continued to doubt His presence and power to provide. They couldn't seem to remember from one day to the next, the things that God had provided. Their limited view of God never limited God, but created stumbling blocks that they could hardly overcome.

Our stumbling blocks do not have to be killers of our faith. Satan will remind us often when we fail, but we have been given the power to overcome. We have the authority of

Christ to win in every situation of our lives. While the enemy tries to defeat us with guilt, we need to understand that our failures don't have to define who we are.

It is the power and authority of Christ that defines us. He overcame death, hell and the grave to provide all that we need to overcome those things make us feel like dying; like we are going through hell, and even those things where our survival seems impossible.

With God, nothing is impossible. The enemy can make us believe that we are completely useless because of our failures, but God can turn those failures into productive futures. It is time to break free from the things that limit us from fulfilling our purpose in the Lord.

Introduction

While in a meeting at work, I voiced an opinion that my coworkers agreed with, but unfortunately, they left me hanging by myself. It was a little frustrating because I knew that they all agreed with me and not one of them had my back. I was left alone to look like the fool.

There is nothing that compares to the feeling of complete helplessness. There is isolation when you feel that no one has your back and you don't believe anyone can help you with your troubles. There is only that little voice of confusion in our head that can sometimes speak louder than wisdom. It causes us to doubt much of what we know and believe about the Lord.

When I got to the end of my message, called *Don't Put God in a Box*, I ended up inside a box that I had built. This box had six sides which represented things in our lives that hinder our walk and work with the Lord.

I don't believe I could have prepared myself for feeling of loneliness and darkness that surrounded me. What I thought would be a good visual for others to realize how our own will captivates us; my feeling of complete helplessness was almost overwhelming. I could hardly bear the weight of darkness that surrounded me.

When Jesus was placed on trial, the disciples entered into utter despair because all they had been taught during their three years with Him, was about to be given its biggest test. While much isn't said about most of the disciples, there were key players among them the night before the crucifixion.

Upon careful examination, Peter and Judas gave their hearts to similar troubles because of their actions. Judas sold Jesus out for 30 pieces of silver and Peter denied Him three times before morning. Both disciples battled their guilt, but ended on completely different paths. As the life of Judas ended in suicide, Peter had to wrestle with the fact that he once told Jesus he would die for Him, but cursed out in denial instead.

While I don't compare my short time in the box with the feeling of complete loss for Peter and Judas, but I do believe that I had an intimate glimpse into the reality of their own separation with God. Even though I was only playing a part in the example, the only thing I could do was turn to the Father and repent. Only then could my feeling of separation be met with the open arms of His love for me.

What Jesus did for Peter was what He desires to do for each one of us. When Jesus ministered to Peter, He was not allowing him to stay in that place outside of the fellowship of God. Jesus only desired to restore the purpose that God had placed on Peter. Peter's guilt was acting like his friend, but it was only creating a gulf of separation that grew too large for him to cross on his own strength.

In *Break Out of the Box*, we will be discussing those things that can and will box us in to limit our relationships and ultimately drive us from the presence of God. My hope is to reveal those things to you *before* you get caught up in their grasp. But, even if you have fallen into any of these lies of Satan, I want to assure you of the hope that is found in Christ. None of us have to stay in bondage to these things because Jesus paid the price for our victory.

Our walk with the Lord will be met with many challenges; we will have victories and also face defeat. Within this book are just a few of the things that cause us to stumble before the Lord, but none of them will ever stop His love toward us. He has provided for our victory by already exposing the enemy. All we have to do is be ready to break free from the lies that bind us and walk in newness of life.

Pride: An Unstable Foundation

When I was a child growing up, there was one TV show that I always enjoyed watching with my dad. The show was “*Tarzan*”, with Johnny Weissmuller. Others tried to portray this jungle icon, but to me, none could capture the heart of the character like Mr. Weissmuller. In many of the episodes, someone would end up in quicksand and Tarzan would have to save the day. It seemed that every time someone was captured, he would use a nearby vine for them to grab on to, and he would pull them to safety.

This isn't a story of the exploits of Tarzan. If you read carefully, you will find that people were in need of saving. These people walked through the jungle and stepped onto something that looked like a sure foundation, only to find that their end was near. Quicksand appeared to be solid, but it was a deceiver. Once in its grasp, the unsuspecting inhabitants found themselves unable to get out. The more they would try to wiggle their way out, the faster they would sink.

It wasn't until Tarzan would come by to save the day that the captives could be freed from their bondage. He would use a vine or a branch for them to grab on to and he would pull them to safety. On the show, Tarzan never lost a person to the quicksand.

We have all heard the phrase, “*Don't put God in a box*”. We may have even said it from time to time. I know that I have. If, and when, we have uttered those words, we were very well intentioned in our purpose. We had this idea that we were helping to keep someone from limiting God and His ability to work through a matter.

We have used this phrase when discussing the type of worship that churches should have. We have also tried to keep God out of the box with regard to personal dress in or out of church. There are many more examples and all the while, we never fully comprehend that God is limitless.

Let's say that we do have that understanding of God's unlimited power and authority. Why do we still step in to try our hand at fixing one of our problems by ourselves? Why do we argue with people from other churches about worship music? Why do we discuss church doctrine? Why do we act as if anything that we do automatically has the blessing of God? That somehow we have attained a higher spiritual level because of something we have done.

My friends, the answer is PRIDE. We all suffer from bouts with pride. We all place ourselves above others at times. We think that what we did was better. If you are denying this, you are presently losing the battle with pride.

Pride is the foundation of most, if not all of our problems. Pride is the base for the box that we try to put God into. For some, pride is their box. No matter the case, pride is the beginning of destruction. Prov. 16:18 states: *Pride goes before destruction, And a haughty spirit before a fall.* If we don't keep ourselves in check, or have a close friend to help keep watch, pride will surely slip in to our lives.

What do I mean when I say that we have to keep ourselves in check? Quite simply, we have to maintain a clean house. All too often, someone will arrive at the scene and make a judgment about an event or another person. They will act as if they are an authority in this judgment and have others believing them. During this time of casting judgment, a lot of these individuals have been found guilty of the same or a similar act. Their condemnation is greater than the first.

We can find a similar story in God's Word. In John chapter 8 we read the story of the Woman caught in the very act of adultery. She was brought to Jesus by her accusers to see what Jesus would do to her. They said that Moses would have had her stoned. The crowd was correct in all points but Jesus did something that threw everyone off course.

In verse 7, Jesus said that whoever was without sin could cast the first stone. He then stooped down to write on the ground. What did Jesus write on the ground? I have heard a lot of speculation on this matter, but this doesn't really matter. What we really have is the Holy Spirit writing on the hearts of men.

Hebrews 4:12 states: *For the Word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.* When Jesus said that the one without sin could cast the first stone, every man had a personal piercing by the Word of God. The Word of God discerned the thoughts and intents of the heart of every man standing as her accuser, and it found them guilty.

Jesus knew that the woman was guilty. Jesus knew that He was the one that could cast the only stone. Yet, He knew that there was a greater work to be done in all that were present than just dealing with the one caught in sin. His actions brought deliverance to the woman and deflected the condemnation back on her accusers. He did not desire to crush anyone but wanted to make a way to set her accusers free as well.

In 1 Corinthians 11:31, Paul said that if we judge ourselves, we should not be judged. Now obviously we cannot correctly judge our own actions or intents. And when we try, we will most likely act like the Pharisee who prayed in the temple with the publican. We will allow pride to incorrectly judge what we do and say.

When we judge ourselves, we have to use the Word of God. We have to allow the Holy Spirit to bring conviction when we need correcting and to offer encouragement when we need picked up. When we allow God to judge everything about us, He will judge by His love. That is not to say that we will not reap the reward of wrong doing. God is a righteous judge in all things. He will judge, bring conviction, as needed, and then draw us to Himself. His greatest desire is to have a strong, loving and close relationship with all of us.

What are some of the ways that we allow pride to enter in? Some of the obvious ones are when we enter a competition. Whether we enter a team or individual sport, our competitive spirit will allow pride to steal the enjoyment of the game. We often compete to win, no matter how much it costs. Our pride does not like being defeated. Our pride can't wish success to our competitors. We even develop rivalries and keep a tally of who has the most wins.

One of the most common forms of pride comes from a competition that should not be a competition. It is really sad when we compete for a position in church. We can't simply trust God for His timing in our lives and we get offended at how the pastor is using someone.

Churches also get caught up in this competitive spirit. Competition is one of the most destructive forces that comes against the church. It hinders our ability to corporately show the love of God. It keeps pastors from praying with and for one another. It keeps pastors and congregations from working together. It keeps the lost from seeing what Jesus is supposed to mean in our lives.

One of the easiest ways for pride to creep in is through our feelings. This happens when

someone says or does something and our feelings get hurt. We walk in offense rather than trusting God to handle the matter. Please listen to this with all of your heart; hurt feelings are an act of pride. When we get offended at something or someone, our pride is beginning to rage. When we walk in offense, we are putting more trust, more faith in the offense rather than God.

We have to keep our eyes on the Lord. We have to trust that He was and is and is to come. He is in control. He is still seated on the throne of grace. No matter what the matter happens to be, He will work all things out for our good and His glory. He will raise us up. He will cause us to overcome. He will deliver us. He has won the victory over death, hell and the grave. He will cause our enemies to flee. We are His. We are bought with the price of His blood. We have been redeemed.

I believe that none of us ever intends to walk with a prideful heart, but if we ever allow it to take hold, it will be a force of destruction like we have never seen. When we stand on the foundation of pride, we may feel secure for a moment, but will sink into despair without even knowing. If we build our lives with a structure of pride, we will end up in a glass house. Our own flaws will be exposed to those around us, and our destruction will not come from anything on the outside, but the rage of sin on the inside of our pride.

Pride is not a steady foundation for our box. It is like the quicksand in the show, Tarzan. Pride is a deceiver that entices us with surety but caused us to sink into its mire. The more we try to wiggle our way out, the faster we sink. Jesus is the Savior, the Vine and the Branch that we can grab on to and be pulled to the safety of His presence.

How Things Appear

I'm not sure how many people will remember the comedian named Steven Wright, but his dry monotone was quite humorous. He has been best known for his one liners that look at life from a slightly skewed perspective. There was one quip that I remember him saying, but I'm not actually sure that it was original to him. He said, "*The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence, but you still have to mow it*".

It is funny when we think of times we struggle, and wonder what it would be like, having a different job, a different church, or just a different life all together. This quote brings to reality, the need to maintain what we have and where we are, no matter what it is.

We tend to think that it is always better somewhere else, when in fact, it may not be. It can be difficult to live our lives when we see that we are in a rut while others seem to prosper. We think that the grass is greener under someone else's feet because we don't remember that the grass under our feet requires the same things as the grass under their feet. We want the green grass, without the effort it takes to have it.

1 Corinthians 5:7 says "We walk by faith and not by sight", yet so many times, in our Christian walk, we struggle with the things that pass before our eyes. Why is this true for us all? Why do we have these struggles when our faith and our natural sight collide? Is our faith too small? Are our situations just too big? I can't answer any of these questions from a psychological point of view, but I hope that this chapter will encourage you from a scriptural perspective.

It is very natural for us to rely on our eyes for information. The other four senses are as equally important, but we seem to let the eyes rule. Our eyes process a lot of information which causes the other senses to react.

As important as the eyes are to receiving, interpreting and reacting to information, our spirit needs to have the ability to override what the flesh wants to do. It is very difficult to process information that seems impossible for the flesh not to react; however, we need to allow the Holy Spirit opportunities to train our spirit to act like Him.

In 1 Kings Chapter 17, we find the widow that Elijah visited in Zarephath. Elijah asked her for a drink of water and a morsel of bread. She was well prepared to provide the water for Elijah, but she knew that she did not have enough meal for her, her son and Elijah to eat.

She was planning to make one last meal for herself and her son, and then they would die. Her eyes did not deceive her; there was only a small portion of meal in the barrel. According to what her eyes were telling her, she could not feed the prophet.

Elijah made what seemed to be a very cold hearted request. He told the woman to make him a cake first and then one each for herself and her son. He put this woman at a serious cross road. In the natural, all seemed hopeless. She and her son were going to die soon and the prophet was asking for their last meal.

She may have been thinking that since they were going to die anyway, they might as well get it over with. Or, she may have actually believed that the prophet knew something that she did not. None the less, she obeyed the voice of the prophet. Against all tangible knowledge and all human understanding, she made the cake for Elijah.

The woman had to put her flesh into subjection of the Word from God. When God saw that she went against the appearance of death and obeyed the voice of the prophet, He

never let her barrel of meal or cruse of oil run empty. God provided from the place that could not be seen with human eyes. That place is called faith.

In my next example I want to utilize a couple of men that could not use their eyes to wrestle with the appearance of a matter. In Mark 20:30-34, two blind men were sitting on the side of the road and heard that Jesus was going to pass by. They had heard about this man named Jesus and hoped that one day, He could touch them. When it was apparent that Jesus was close by, they began to shout out, "Jesus, son of David, have mercy on us." Since their eyes could not discern what was happening around them, they had to rely on their ears.

We often have problems when we use our ears to make discerning judgments. We listen to the voice of doubt and can't always hear the truth. They only had their ears so they had to be very careful of what they listened to.

The multitude around the blind men began to tell them to keep quiet. They could have been obedient to the other voices and kept quiet. They could have believed that it was their destiny to be blind. They could have believed that they were not good enough for Jesus to talk with them. There are so many things about the situation that would have given them a reason to give up on their hope for healing.

The two men did not shut up. They had decided that they were going to get the attention of Jesus regardless of what others had told them. They decided that today was their day for victory. Today was their day for healing. And they shouted louder. "JESUS, SON OF DAVID, HAVE MERCY ON US."

They kept shouting to the King until they got His attention. They were not going to let others steal their opportunity with the King. Jesus stopped and asked the blind men what He could do for them. When they asked for their eyes to be opened, He had compassion on them and opened their eyes.

These two stories are very relevant to our own struggles with appearance. We allow our eyes to convince us that failure is imminent. We allow our natural ears and our spiritual ears to listen to things that are contrary to the Word of God.

Our eyes tell us that there is no hope for victory. Our eyes tell us that, what someone else has is better than what we have. Our eyes make us think that something is good for us regardless of what the Word of God tells us. Our ears hear that we are not good enough. Our ears hear that God's promises do not fit our situation. Our ears hear that our failures will keep us from God.

Regardless of what our eyes see or our ears hear, God's promises are yes and amen. God is bigger than our problems. In God's eyes, we are not failures if we continue to fight in the battle. And that is the key; we must continue to fight in the battle.

No matter how bad a situation may look, God always looks good. No matter how big a situation may appear; God is always bigger. No matter what the voice of the enemy may say; the voice of God is always true.

In my time of trying to tie up the loose ends on this chapter, I went through my own battle with appearances. I am actually not all the way through with the battle, but while in the battle, God showed me something. I am still His, and He is on my side. He showed me that He desires to use me even when I don't think that I am useful.

Please allow me the opportunity to share this testimony. A friend of mine went into the hospital emergency room and I could not go immediately due to being at work. I wanted to leave a few minutes early, but I ended up leaving twenty minutes later than the normal

quitting time. When I reached the hospital, I found out that the person had been discharged. With the symptoms that the person was having, I thought that he would have been there for several more hours. Praise God that everything was fine.

While still at the hospital, I began to have a conversation with a friend in the Lord about my current battles. My friend began to minister to me and encourage me in the Lord. After about ten minutes, a former co-worker of mine walked in the emergency room. Well, I say walked in, he was bent over and in severe pain. He was having major discomfort from recurring back problems.

I went over to my friend to help him get to the triage nurse for his initial vitals. I waited around to see if he was going to need any other assistance. While waiting, I shared with my friend that was ministering to me how I knew the person.

I did end up helping him to his emergency room bed. He was alone and in extreme pain. I decided that since I did go to the hospital to visit a friend, I might as well stay and be a friend to him.

We had an opportunity to talk at length for the first time in years. We had lost contact with each other since we no longer worked together. I was being used by the Lord to minister to him. He had been going through a lot of struggles and his relationship with the Lord was not as strong as it should be. (I knew this from a brief encounter a few months prior to the hospital) I had the opportunity to pray for him when he needed it most that night.

While I was sitting with him, I began to recount the events leading up to my friend coming into the emergency room. I could see God was in that whole evening and was leading me the whole way. Now remember, I was in a bad frame of mind. I felt useless in so many ways. I know what God's Word said about me. I know that I have a wonderful wife that believes in me and encourages me all of the time. But I was still struggling with how another person feels about me.

Within my current struggles, I do not feel trusted by this other person. I do not feel like a winner. I do not feel that this person had much faith in me at all. All of this is very difficult for me to handle.

After my friend, with the back pain, was medicated enough to not really know that I was there, I decided to leave. As I entered the waiting room, I saw a couple of other friends and had the opportunity to minister to one of them going through a real battle. Instead of being useless for God, He used me to minister to several people in one night. God is a good God.

So what did I learn from this whole experience. God is in the midst of the storms. Regardless of how bad the storm looks, and no matter how helpless we feel in the natural, God will put us in a situation to encourage us. He will show us that He is the light unto our path. He is our very present help in a time of trouble. Read Psalm 46:1.

I know that God did not cause the symptoms that my first friend had, but He used them to get me to the hospital. When I knew that my friend was not at the hospital, I wanted to go home and finish this chapter. God wanted a sister in the Lord to encourage me, and keep me there long enough for the third friend to get to the hospital. I was sent there for Him. Then, to put the icing on the cake, God had the other friends in the ER waiting room.

In the midst of my storm, God was there. He was always there. When I was allowing the situation and frustrations to become bigger than God, He was there. Regardless of

whether or not I am ever trusted by anyone else, God trusts me with His work. God believes in me to be ready for His calling, no matter if the situations change in mid stream.

And, so it is with you. I do not know what you are facing. I do not know how difficult things appear to you, or how big your problems may be. But I have to tell you that God is there. He is with you right now. His greatest desire for you is victory in Him. In order for there to be victory, there has to be a battle. In order for there to be a testimony, there has to be a test.

God's plan for you is not failure. God's plan is not for you to give up. He wants you and me to continue in the battle until we overcome. As we overcome, we will gain more strength in Him. As we overcome, our spirit man will learn more about how to react like the Spirit of God. As our spirit reacts more like the Spirit of God, the enemy will begin to believe that he is actually fighting the Spirit of God.

We have to walk by faith and not by our sight. We have to walk by faith and not by what we hear, in the natural or the spiritual; 1 John 4:1-3. When we do that, God provides from that place that we cannot see with our natural eyes. His provision is not limited by what we see, but we have to see His provision by what our spiritual eyes see.

Do not let the appearance of your situation steal your moment with the King. Don't let it steal your opportunity to be used by the King. Don't let the emptiness of others take away your opportunity to have the glory of God revealed in your life, but allow this time of His glory open their eyes to His goodness. Give all thanks and Glory to the King: Jesus!

Walking by faith can be difficult at times, but it is absolutely necessary in our trust of God. It is almost as if we need to put on spiritual blinders so we won't have as many distractions, pulling us from our path to His glory. However, these blinders can't be allowed to keep us from seeing those opportunities where God wants to use us for His glory. Sort of like having those "Good Samaritan" moments in our lives, when we stop what we are doing to be used of God. Those moments, when we give up our plans for His plans. When we can get to this point, our grass will begin to be like the green pasture, as spoken of in Psalm 23. It will be a place of uninhibited worship of God, rest for our soul, and a safe place for others to feel His presence.

Lack of Expectation

I really struggle with my own expectations of the Lord. While attending church services, where the evangelist was praying for those who needed healing, I stood in the line for her to pray for my back. Years prior, I was having some back problems and a chiropractor took some x-rays before making any adjustments. As he and I looked at those x-rays, he explained what was wrong with my back.

He said that the middle part of my spine was riddled with arthritis, and completely out of line due to my left leg being an inch shorter than my right leg. He made the comment that he had never seen anyone, my age, with arthritis that severe in their back. I was about 35 at the time. The looseness of my back had gotten to the point that I could maneuver my back and make it pop several times. This movement would sometimes relieve the discomfort and tightness in my back.

As I was standing in the line for healing, the evangelist prayed for the person in front of me and then went on to something else. I felt a little dejected, but was only “somewhat” expectant of a touch from God. I did not try to get her attention, but sat down, disappointed at what just transpired.

A few days later, I scheduled an appointment, with the same chiropractor, to have him take an x-ray. My intent was to see how much the arthritis had progressed since I could so easily maneuver and pop my back. I was genuinely concerned about my back and wanted to know what my options were. After he took the x-ray, he popped them on to the light box, and my eyes could hardly believe what they saw.

While my back was still out of alignment, the arthritis was completely gone. The chiropractor never did do a side by side comparison of the original and the new x-rays, but I know what I saw with both sets taken. I realized then that my expectation of God had to be in Him, and not in the evangelist. I do believe that she is anointed of the Lord, but it is still the Lord who heals.

I find it amazing that, when we read God’s Word, we can place ourselves in the midst of every story. What I mean is; there are many times in our lives that we re-live the same struggles of those written about in the Bible have lived. We have the same struggles. We have the same doubts. We suffer many of the same defeats. And we often question why God has not come through for us.

Poet and philosopher George Santayana made this statement, “Those who cannot remember history are condemned to repeat it”. In many ways, we do learn from the mistakes of others, but when it comes to our spiritual lives, we can’t seem to stop making mistakes.

Why do we limit the work of God in our lives when we can read in His Word that He will provide all of our needs? Read Phil. 4:19. The limitations of God are based on our inability to let Him do His job. In other words, if we will stop trying to do things in our own strength, in our own timing and in our own way, I believe that we would see the hand of God in a more powerful way. Yet, we continue to do things that cause us to struggle because we don’t really expect God to do what He said He would do.

What do we expect God to do in our lives? I’m not asking the question, what do we *want* God to do, but what do we expect Him to do? We can read His Word and have full

understanding of most things but when it comes to living our lives we seem to struggle with applying His truth.

In 1 Kings Chapter 18, Elijah had an incredible Holy Ghost power trip. By the mighty hand of God, the 450 prophets of Baal were mocked and slain by Elijah. Then at the beginning of chapter 19, he is scared out of his mind because Jezebel said that she wanted him dead. Elijah had a great victory one day and cowering in fear the next. We probably wonder why Elijah played the coward so quickly after an incredible move of God but all too often, we do the same thing. We so easily forget the times that God moved in our lives.

Peter had a remarkable experience when Jesus invited him out on the water. Most people focus on the fact that he sank, but he did walk on the water. He was standing in front of the very one who had invited him out of the boat but when the winds and the waves began to swell around him, he lost his focus. He momentarily forgot what to expect from Jesus. Jesus had invited him out of the boat so Peter should have expected that as long as Jesus walked on the water, he should be able to do the same thing. His focus turned to the circumstance instead of Jesus.

Stories of great victory followed by a humbling defeat seem to be scattered throughout God's Word. The same things happen to us. We are given the strength overcome in a particular situation, which builds our faith, only to be defeated or overcome a little while later. We can't seem to get off of this roller coaster.

We are not only affected by a lack of expectation in our daily walk though. We also struggle at church. Church is the one place that should be safe for us to be but for many, it can be a place of obligation. That's right; we go to church because we think it's our duty to be there. It does not hold a place in our heart for rejoicing. We are only there because we think we should be there. Therefore, we do not expect anything great to happen while we are there.

To interject another thought here; there is another group of believers who feel no obligation at all to going to church. They only go when they don't have anything else planned. They do not understand that they are hindering their own growth in the spirit. And when they do go to church, they will most likely have no expectations about the church service.

They will attend a service and wonder why they even went. They also don't understand that their lack of attendance has an adverse affect on the advancing of the Kingdom of God. This happens in two ways. The individuals are not growing to a point to where they will work for the Lord and either bring someone into a saving knowledge of the Lord or have the knowledge/understanding to encourage another believer. And they are not bringing their tithes into the store house. Read Malachi 3

In my book, *The Weapons of Our Warfare*, I wrote that some people will go to work on Monday morning and say, "I went to church yesterday" while others will say "Wow, what an incredible move of God in church yesterday". The sad thing about these two statements is that they could be talking about the same church service. Yes, there are times that a church service can be better than expected; however, those times come when we at least expect something.

The woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34) was healed because she expected to be healed. The Centurions' servant was healed (Matt. 8) because of expectation. The man lowered through the roof of the house (Mark 2) was healed because of expectation.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were delivered from the fiery furnace because they refused to bow down to King Nebuchadnezzar and expected God to deliver them from the furnace. Daniel was delivered from the mouth of the lion (Daniel 6) because he would only pray to God and expected to overcome by the mighty hand of God.

David defeated Goliath because he remembered how God had delivered him and his sheep from the mouth of the lion and the bear. He expected God to also deliver him out of the hand of the Philistine. These are just a few of the examples from God's Word when His people had great expectations and He delivered.

My friends, we have to stop expecting the defeat offered by the world and start expecting God to confound the wise. We don't have to live in misery or defeat. We are called by God to walk in great victory. Jesus said that we would do the things that He did, and even greater things. Jesus was never defeated, even at the cross. He walked in complete victory through the cross.

Numbers 23:19 says, "*God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?*" Now look at verse 20 - "*Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has blessed, and I cannot reverse it.*"

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, we are called to be a blessing. It is a command that we cannot reverse. However, we can't be a blessing when we walk in defeat. We are defeated when we stop expecting God to be bigger than our circumstances.

Our lack of expectation does not make God any less powerful but because of our own will, we limit His will from working His perfection in our lives. We also place limits on ourselves and go through life with an Eeyore complex. We believe that everything will end short of any kind of benefit or victory for us, with the 'other guy' always taking the prize.

God said, in Jeremiah 29:11, "*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.*" His purpose over us always begins with His love for us. His purpose over us always ends in victory. We should begin to expect more from His love because it will never run dry and will always lead us to victory.

Crippled by Fear

The year was 1933. Franklin D. Roosevelt had recently won the 1932 presidential election against Herbert Hoover. The Great Depression was in full swing and the country was gripped by vast uncertainty. During his first inaugural address, F.D.R. made one of the most noted quotes of any president. In an effort to guide the United States out of the depression, he tried to shake the foundations of uncertainty and fear that every American possessed.

President Roosevelt said in the first paragraph of his address, *“I am certain that my fellow Americans expect that on my induction into the Presidency I will address them with a candor and a decision which the present situation of our people impel. This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, **let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself**—nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance. In every dark hour of our national life a leadership of frankness and vigor has met with that understanding and support of the people themselves which is essential to victory. I am convinced that you will again give that support to leadership in these critical days”*. – FDR.

President Roosevelt was asserting that the men and women of this country needed truth, even if it was hard to take, in order to endure its present condition. His quote, “We have nothing to fear but fear itself” is misleading and taken out of context if it is not completely stated. He said that fear is *“unjustified terror”*. Fear is an unjustified terror that *“paralyzes the needed efforts to convert retreat into advance”*.

That is an incredible statement. Now as believers, we don’t need to fear fear. However, we need to understand that our enemy, Satan, will do everything he can to make us retreat. Satan wants to paralyze us into inaction.

The actual definition of fear is this: *a distressing emotion aroused by impending danger, evil, pain, etc., whether [the](#) threat is real or imagined; the feeling or condition of being afraid*. There are a lot of things that we fear. As the definition says, they are either real or imagined, but they always seem real. Someone who does not fear spiders or heights can’t imagine the real suffering that these things cause some people.

Fear can be very debilitating for some people. There are those that cannot leave their homes because they are afraid of everything outside. Howard Hughes, one of the world’s wealthiest men of his day, suffered terribly with Mysophobia (the fear of germs). This fear basically crippled a man who once had great power and influence.

The nation of Israel was very afraid of Goliath. There wasn’t a man among them who dared to challenge the giant. Goliath stood before the army of Israel for 40 days, challenging them to send one man to fight him. His size, his arrogance and confidence literally had the entire army of Israel cowering in fear and shame. The challenge was also daunting. Goliath said that if they could send someone to beat him, the Philistines would be their servants. But, if he defeated their soldier, then Israel would have to serve the Philistines.

It was a situation where giving your best effort may not be good enough because defeat meant slavery. Victory was the only outcome that would be acceptable. So, twice a day for 40 days, no one would take the challenge. Not even King Saul.

When David arrived with food supplies for his brothers, he had the chance to hear the challenge of Goliath. He was astonished that no one had accepted the opportunity to do battle with Goliath. He asked, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should defy the armies of the living God?" David said to King Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

Finally, someone was willing to stand up to the challenge of Goliath. David made an important note prior to his battle. He was not seeking glory for himself but desired to give God the glory. I believe that he was bothered that no one would stand up for God when He was mocked.

David made a convincing argument to King Saul to allow him to do battle with the giant. He told Saul that God had delivered the lion and the bear into his hands and Goliath would fall at his hand just as they did. David recounted the times that God saved him. I don't believe that this was just for Saul to hear. I believe that David was remembering this to build his faith in the hand of the Lord.

Goliath was not intimidated at all by David and mocked him even more. David did not go into the battle with much weaponry, but he told Goliath that he came in the name of the Lord of Hosts. David did not come equipped with his own strength but God's. He knew that if he was going to defeat the giant, God had to get the glory.

The nation of Israel needed someone like David to make them remember how big their God truly is. We have heard it said "It's not the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the fight in the dog." In the case of David and Goliath, it was a matter of the size of our God. It was the same epic battle that was played out between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal. It was the same battle between Daniel and the counselors of King Darius. And ultimately, the battle of Jesus on the cross of Calvary.

Throughout the Bible, God would raise up one man to challenge what was going wrong with His people. This person would have to challenge his own fears to accept the call that God had placed on his life.

You may be asking why I started this chapter speaking about Franklin Roosevelt. At the time of his election, the United States was in financial ruin and turmoil. Thousands of Americans had committed suicide because of fear of the collapse of the stock market. President Roosevelt had the firm belief that the only cure for the fear that crippled so many people was a shot of self confidence.

He told them from the beginning that he could not sugar coat the problems that they were facing as a nation, but he also told them that he believed in them to overcome. America needed one person to stand up against the giant called fear and get people to rally behind the notion that they could persevere.

Okay, so I have shared a good Bible story and a bit of American history, but what do they have to do with our very real situations? What are some of the things that we fear? What causes us to shudder when confronted? I have a few examples that I believe we all struggle with at some point in our lives.

One fear that we tend to have is our past. We have an understanding that the seeds we've sown in the past may grow up to haunt us. We have all had bad relationships and made

some pretty stupid decisions in our formative years. And yes, they may haunt us, but the forgiving, redemptive blood of Jesus has wiped the slate clean.

This does not mean that we won't have to pay the earthly piper one day, but it does mean that He has forgotten it. The Father of all creation looks at us through the redemptive blood of His Son Jesus. When He provided forgiveness for our sins, He truly forgave us. The sins of the past no longer have a place in His memory.

Another fear that we have is the fear of failure. We don't try things because we are afraid that we will fail. We even say that we don't want to fail God. You may have heard it said; "If I don't try, I won't fail". I will say this as plainly as I can: If you don't/won't try you have already failed. Look at the times that Peter failed and then look at how much God used him anyway. God desires for us to get beyond the fear that we will fail.

Do you remember the servant that was given one talent? (Matt. 25:14-30) He was afraid of failing his master and he buried the talent. When his master returned, he was furious to find out that the servant hid the talent. God has given us specific talents for His purpose and He does not want us to hide them. God has given us a specific call to further His kingdom and yet we hide behind the fear of failure.

We also hide behind the fear of rejection. My friends, Jesus told His disciples that when anyone rejected them they were actually rejecting Him. Rejection is a hard thing to take, but I also believe that we should use it to grow. There are times that we were rejected because God was protecting us. We go into a situation believing it to be the hand of God only to be turned away.

Years may pass before we can look back to see the hand of God all over us when the rejection came. God wants us to prosper and persevere, but there are times that He needs us to grow up before we can advance or achieve in a certain thing. A lot of times we have to grow up in our trust of Him. We have to be able to trust that His hand is always holding us.

One last area where we tend to fear is our future. Not knowing what tomorrow will bring can cause panic and hardship. We desire to know what our next move should be but will often be turning a corner in a dark alley. We can't see where our next bit of provision or direction will come from. I think that we also want many of our decisions made for us. But the reason we struggle is because we are making decisions without the council of God.

God has given us the Holy Spirit to teach us all things and give us wisdom, yet, we lean heavily on our own understanding. We look with our own eyes and interpret the future from our perspective. When we do this, we cause much undue hardship in our lives. We can't see our future and God has made our future. He sees from a much wider angle than we could possibly imagine. We need to trust that our past, present and future is in His hands.

Throughout God's Word, He tells us that we are a people who will overcome (Num. 13:30, Rom. 12:21 1 John 2:13, 1 John 4:4). He tells us that He loves us (John 17:26, Rom. 5:8, 8:35, Ephesians 3:19). He tells us that we are His children (John 1:12, Rom. 8:16, 1John 3:1-2). He tells us that we are His joy (Heb. 12:2). He tells us that if He is for us, then who can be against us (Rom. 8:31). He tells us that we are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28).

Brothers and sisters, we are not called to have fear. 2 Tim. 1:7 states that God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. He has called us

to work in the power of His Spirit. He has called us to love by His Spirit. And, He has called us to have the mind of His Spirit.

If you have fear of anything, call upon the name of the Lord and rebuke it in the name of Jesus. Rebuke the initial trauma that caused the fear and break its curse over your life. Proclaim victory over fear right now in the name of Jesus because He has set you free. John 8:36 says: "Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed". Live free from fear today!

President Roosevelt never discounted the fears of the American people; however, he knew that the only way to face those fears wasn't in retreat but in advance. He said that the citizens needed to take courage and face them head on. No matter what we face, we have an advocate who helps us to meet the challenges before us. He goes before the Father on our behalf and sends His Spirit to guide, teach and empower us. Through Jesus, we have nothing to fear; not even fear. We are more than conquerors, because God is on our side and our trust is in Him alone.

An Offendable Heart

I used to be the type of person that would become upset or offended at the slightest change in circumstances. I couldn't stand change at all. I was so bad, that even if I knew about a change well in advance, I still had a hard time dealing with it. The advance notice would give me time to stew over the change and get angry. It also wouldn't take much for me to fly off the handle. It seemed that everything used to offend me.

I don't remember when my heart became so fragile, but as I look back at the time in my life, I often wonder how I had any friends in my life. I would allow bitterness to nestle into my heart, and then allow time to heal my offended heart. When I would become offended, I would spend days in isolation. I would stop going to church, I wouldn't call anyone and I wouldn't answer the phone if someone tried to call me. I did go to work because I needed the paycheck, but would struggle the entire time. I learned the hard way that living with an offendable heart can deteriorate your rational thinking into a realm of irrational decisions.

Offense is the culmination of several things with which we wrestle. It can literally cripple a person from living a life full of joy. Walking in offense is like being a pit bull placed in a fence waiting for the gate to be opened by an unsuspecting victim. The offended person is waiting for any opportunity to be upset or angry and then spout off to anyone who will listen to their problems. The problem with this is these kinds of people really don't like confrontation so they will tell everyone what the perceived offense is instead of going to the offender themselves. This will only sow discord and will not solve any problems.

Living a life of being offended is not a life that can give God any glory. The person will not take joy in most things. When we walk in offense, our pride takes center stage in our lives. Nearly everything that we do or are involved in has to be centered on us. If anyone happens to receive praise for something that we thought that we should get, our pride will open the gate of offense. When pride rears its ugly head, everything gets out of order in our own relationship with God. Love cannot flow at all. The main reason for this is the fact that love emanates from the throne of God and God detests pride.

Love and pride cannot flow together from the same source. James 3:11 says, "*Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening?*" Pride causes us to be easily offended. Pride causes us to wear our hearts on our sleeves for everyone to see. But, let me tell you this, when we place our hearts out there for everyone to see, it becomes an easy target for the fiery darts of the enemy. Unfortunately, we see everyone as an enemy. Even if someone is showing love and kindness, we often times find reasons to be offended.

I Corinthians chapter 12 discusses the diversity and importance of spiritual gifts and chapter 13 discusses how they operate. Verse 31 of chapter 12 says, "But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way." Chapter 13 discusses the more excellent way and to summarize, it reveals to us that the gifts of God all work by love.

If we have an offendable heart we can't effectively work by love. Therefore the gifts of God will not be as evident in someone who is offended all of the time. I am not saying that someone who is offended all of the time does not have any spiritual gifts. I am

saying this, when we walk with an offended heart the love of God cannot flow and therefore the gifts of God cannot display His glory. In the end, the things we do for God are just works devoid of heavenly power.

An offended heart also derives from fear. When we place ourselves in a position of fear, a whole spectrum of things can make us offended. However, most fear is caused by the imaginations of the mind. We fear what people may think of us. I heard it said one time that we get so concerned about what others think about us when the truth is that they are probably not thinking of us at all.

My friends, it isn't all that important what others think of us. Now I know that we all need to feel appreciated, but we can't spend our entire life being consumed with needing affirmation. When we do, we can easily be offended for the lack of being affirmed. It does matter what others think of us to a point, however, it is God who provides true affirmation in our lives.

Have you ever seen something and became really upset only to find out that what you saw was only part of the situation? I have on more than one occasion. I have found it very difficult to eat crow afterwards. My point is this; we can get offended by how things appear to be and not necessarily how they truly are.

We think we see something and have an understanding of a situation and make a decision to allow our feelings to be hurt. Once we are convinced of our truth, we become a talebearer. Proverbs 18:8 & 26:22 says, "The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost part of the belly". In other words, they cut deep and cause a lot of pain. No good word can come from someone who causes division.

Proverbs 26:20 says, "Where there is no wood, the fire goes out; and where there is no talebearer, strife ceases." A talebearer is a person who lives a life of being offended. They don't necessarily want to take the reins or responsibility of anything but get offended if someone else is given a position. If they do take a position, it is usually a short lived commitment. They will come up with an excuse to quit or dump the responsibility in another person's lap.

I have already mentioned this in part, but a life of offense is filled with jealousy. An offended heart cannot stand the success of others. It has no desire to elevate others to their greatest potential. We also find it hard to administer grace when it is needed. Oh, we desire grace when we have done wrong, but we fail at giving it in return. We are so full of the offense of jealousy that we cannot see another person's need for grace or rejoice in their success. Read Matthew 18:21-35.

This may be a surprise to some, but we also get offended at God. That's right; we get offended at God because we think that He failed to do something. If we pray about something and don't see an answer, or the answer we expect, then we become offended. We wonder why God hasn't answered. Don't tell me that you haven't done that, because I know you have. I have also done this more often than I care to divulge. We can say all we want that "unanswered" prayer doesn't offend us, but I know it does. It offends us because we think that we have to endure longer than necessary to grow through a situation.

As a former cross-country runner in high school, I had to train to gain the endurance I needed for the actual race. The hard thing about spiritual training is the fact that we often don't understand when the training stopped and the race has begun. That is a difficult question to answer, but, I can honestly say that through time we will see the answers

come through for us. When we take a look back at our situations we can usually pick out the moments that God was working on our behalf.

We need to remember that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. He sees the end from the beginning and knows what lies around the next corner. We have to learn to trust that He is always looking out for our best interest and the best interest of others. He desires to bring forth His blessings while bringing us to the point that we reflect the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.

In most things that we do for the Lord we try to follow a formula and it doesn't usually work. However, when it comes to being offended, God has given us a simple formula to follow. Matthew 18:15-17 says, *"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.*

16*But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.'* **17***And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector."*

God's Word says to do everything you can to get the problem worked out. He says that we have to stop carrying the offense. I believe that verse 17 does not give a right to be offended either. I still believe that we must love the person despite their refusal to reconcile.

Walking in the state of being offended is not an easy walk. I know because I lived it for many years. I say that I lived it but I can't leave out my bride. She had to endure so many things because of my offended heart. What I have learned is that there is no rationale for living with an offendable heart. I would do or say things that made no sense at all.

It is a confusing time in a person's life because they desire friendship but find it difficult to attain. They desire to walk closer to the Lord but find that they are not as close as they thought. They desire to work for the Lord but do not understand why they can't flow in the Spirit like they think they should.

My friends, I Corinthians 14:33 says that God is not the author of confusion. He has called us to a higher calling. The only thing keeping us from fulfilling that call is ourselves. We are hindering the call that God has for us. It is time to put away the offendable heart and ask the Lord to replace it with an unoffendable heart. An unoffendable heart is useable by the Lord. It reflects the light of Jesus to a world that desperately cries out for His light. We are the people that God has called for this time. We are the people who must be unoffendable in order to share the Gospel to reach the lost.

How do we overcome the offended heart? How do we get beyond the things that genuinely wound us and bring offense? The first thing that we must do is allow the love of God permeate every part of who we are. If we can do this, we can allow forgiveness to break the yoke of bondage that offense brings to us and whoever caused the offense. Forgiveness will set us free from the bondage of anger and jealousy. It will heal the broken hearted.

Jesus could not obtain victory over the cross without refusing the spirit of offense. He chose to forgive those who beat Him, mocked Him and cast lots for His raiment. Luke 23:34. He chose to allow the love of God flow through Him rather than the desire to exact revenge.

Jesus said in John 14:12, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.”* We can forgive like Jesus because we have the same spirit working within us. We just have to allow Him to have control over the desires of our flesh.

My friends, time is getting short and we must work to advance the kingdom of God. We have to do everything for the kingdom by the power of His Spirit and for the Glory of God. When we desire His kingdom to be advanced rather than our ministry, we allow no room for an offended heart or jealousy.

A key to overcome an offendable heart is learning how to minimize stress and not letting it control your mental and emotional state. It is a difficult process, but one which we can go through if we allow the Spirit of God to have more control of our thoughts and emotions.

Through Him, we can learn what stresses are good and bad for us, and how we can thrive in all kinds of stress. The Holy Spirit will also give us the peace that surpasses all understanding, which will help us to understand that other people are not our enemy, but only influenced by him. The more we can allow joy to remain in our hearts, the less that offense will have room to grow. Just remember this; we are the ones who are victorious in Christ, and offense can only trip us up. It cannot defeat us.

Traditions of Men

If you are a fan of classic films, *Fiddler on the Roof*, has to be on your list. The first ten minutes of the film sets the tone for the entire movie, with its discussion and singing about “Tradition”. Tevye, one of the lead characters, talks about the importance of traditions in their lives and how they provide stability and balance. There are a couple of things that he says about traditions that really stand out to me.

“Because of our traditions, we've kept our balance for many, many years... You may ask, ‘How did this tradition get started?’ I'll tell you! I don't know. But it's a tradition... and because of our traditions... Every one of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do.”

At the end of the opening sequence, Tevye gives one final testament for upholding their traditions and further solidifies their need to hold on to those traditions. He said, “Traditions, traditions. Without our traditions, our lives would be as shaky as... as... as a fiddler on the roof!”

Would we really be that unstable without our traditions? Can we stand a little shaking to the foundations of those things we hold so dear? We might, once we understand how they can pull us from the foundation set for us by the Lord.

Traditions do not have to be a bad thing. I can think of many traditions that need to be passed down from generation to generation. One tradition that is very personal to me was a birthday date with my dad. Our birthdays were a day a part, and every year, we would go celebrate with lunch and a movie.

While I thoroughly enjoyed those two things, it was the time with my dad that I cherished the most. I enjoyed these dates even into my teen aged years. When hanging out with my dad should not have been cool, I was enjoying time with him.

It wasn't until my later years that I learned that dad was taking all five of us on a birthday date. This tradition, started by my dad, had such an impact on me and my siblings that we continued these dates with our own children. My own children have enjoyed these dates from the start. Now, both of them are in their late teens, and even though I am no longer “cool”, I still have the honor of taking them on their respective date. My prayer is that my own children will continue this tradition when they have their own children.

There is one thing that we have to understand about traditions before we dig into the trenches of the traditions we hold so dear. The word, traditions, actually has two very different meanings. It comes from the word *paradosis* (G3862), from Greek lexicon in the Strong's concordance. Its definitions are as follows; 1. *Giving up, giving over: A. The act of giving up; B. The surrender of cities. 2. A giving over which is done by word of mouth or in writing, i.e. tradition by instruction, narrative, precept, etc.: A. Objectively, that which is delivered, the substance of a teaching;*

The thing that is compelling about traditions is the difference of meanings at which it holds. One meaning, the teaching aspect, is a release to those who hear and keep the teaching. This meaning, when it is delivered, brings life, not only to the tradition but also to those who pass it on from generation to generation.

One example of tradition that holds fast to this meaning is the Passover, which is celebrated by the Jews. It is a constant reminder of when God delivered the Hebrews from the last plague in Egypt, and ultimately from Egypt. This tradition, like all of the

other feasts of Israel, does not give them something to draw them away from God, but toward Him. The traditions that God initiated are meant to be a reminder of how and when God delivered Israel during a time of need. Ultimately, these traditions bring glory only to God.

The other meaning of the word, tradition, does not bring about freedom, but produces bondage. When we think of someone surrendering a city, we usually see it as giving the city over to an enemy. During a war, when cities are surrendered, the inhabitants become subject to those who “Take” the city. But, let’s look at this from a couple of different vantage points.

In many of the instances that Israel was overtaken by an enemy, they had disobeyed the Lord. Their disobedience to the command of God would usually involve allowing idols to enter into their camp. As they allowed idols into their camp, they also allowed them to be incorporated into their worship. As Israel stepped out from the covering of the Lord, they were met with defeat at the hand of the enemy.

Israel had lost its identity with the command of God, and either altered the tradition or left it altogether. A tradition, born from the command of God, is built on the foundation of His truth and provides covering and protection.

When we institute man’s own understanding into a command of God, we step out from under His covenant protection and hand over the city of our hearts, our families and our churches. We make our ritual, our traditions to be more valuable than the command of God. We lose our identity, not as a son or daughter of the King, but to the covenant command of His love.

Holding on to meaningless traditions is like building a house of cards. Without having a strong foundation and structural support of His Word, these traditions will fold and collapse under the glorious presence of God.

In Matthew chapter five, the scribes and Pharisee’s stepped into a debate, that I am sure they were not counting on. I wonder how many times they knocked themselves in the head, after having discussions with Jesus, and said, “I wish we could have a do-over”. Jesus was never surprised by their failed wisdom, and always prepared to lead them toward the Father.

They asked in Matthew 5:2, *“Why do Your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.”* It would appear that the scribes and Pharisee’s were way ahead of their time as the pioneers of antibacterial hygiene. But, they made one key mistake in their question; they included the word, tradition.

Every time they asked a question like this, Jesus always pointed back to the command of God and challenged them with God’s Word. Jesus wasn’t ever trying to make them look stupid, but to draw them into the real meaning of the Word of God.

Jesus said in verse 3, *“Why do you also transgress the commandment of God because of your tradition?”* I don’t believe that Jesus was talking about the washing of hands before every meal because of how He continued.

As Jesus sustained this discussion, He said in verses 4-6, *“For God commanded, saying, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ ⁵“But you say, ‘Whoever says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is a gift to God”-- ⁶then he need not honor his father or mother.’ Thus you have made the commandment of God of no effect by your tradition.”*

While Jesus was clearly making a point about the command to honor parents, and their complete disregard to the command by instituting their own guidelines, He was also revealing a bigger picture. His overall message was, "The commands of God work fine without your input, follow them as given, without being given to your own interpretation or understanding".

He was sharing with them that they disavowed the command of God by creating their own rules. By making their own traditions, concerning the command of God, they attempted to reduce their responsibility to live by the Word of God.

There are so many ways that we do the exact same thing. We read the Word of God with zeal, try to live by its precepts, and then allow time, peer pressure and discomfort with the truth to cause us to make adjustments to how much we will follow. We adjust the Word of God to fit our comfort level rather than making the necessary adjustments to make ourselves fit into the image of Christ.

Our traditions can bind us and cause us to surrender the city of our heart to the enemy. He does not tear down the walls of that city. We actually open the door to the enemy every time we tell God that His commands are too tough to follow. We won't necessarily say, "God, I can't follow that command." It happens every time we submit to the will of our flesh or let someone else influence us away from following the Lord.

For some, it may be difficult to understand how King David could have been called a man after God's own heart, but as we read the book of Psalms, we should get a clearer picture of his heart for God. In Psalms 119:9-16, David is telling the Lord that he understands His Word but needs more. We could actually pick much more in chapter 19, but these verses give a glimpse of how his heart cries out for the command of God.

Psalm 119:9-16 says, "*How can a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed according to Your word. **10**With my whole heart I have sought You; Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments! **11**Your word I have hidden in my heart, That I might not sin against You. **12**Blessed are You, O LORD! Teach me Your statutes. **13**With my lips I have declared All the judgments of Your mouth. **14**I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches. **15**I will meditate on Your precepts, And contemplate Your ways. **16**I will delight myself in Your statutes; I will not forget Your word"*

The cry of the heart of David should be the cry of our hearts. David truly was a man after God's own heart because he was a man who sought the heart of God. As His children, we make the heart of God flutter every time we call His name.

God desires that we know and understand His commands. Not so He can tower over us like a tyrant ruler, but as a loving Father who wants to guide us toward His riches and goodness. There is so much more to God than we can fathom, but we limit ourselves by the manmade traditions of our hearts. We often usurp His authority with our own will.

If we are going to live free from the bondage that enslaves us, we must let go of our own will and submit to the Lord. We must learn to fashion ourselves after the pattern of Christ. Our ultimate freedom comes from the unselfish surrender to the will of God and follow His Word. Will there be moments of uncertainty? Yes, but when Jesus called Peter out of the boat, He knew that He was asking Peter to do what seemed impossible. Impossible only happens when we do not surrender to the will of God. But, as we surrender, the impossible changes to possible.

Works of Works

I once heard a story about a man who spent a lot of time volunteering at his church. What needed to be done, he was always there to take care of the need. Whether it was to repair the plumbing, or to mow the lawn, he was there. This man was faithful for many years, willing to freely give his time and energy for the needs of the church.

One day, someone wanted to recognize his efforts and asked the church board to see if they could start paying him for his services. At the next board meeting, it had been decided to start paying him for his services.

Very grateful for the money and that someone recognized his efforts, the man continued to provide his services for the church. I don't know exactly how long this went on, but one day, the man asked another church member a simple but profound question. He asked, "Do you think the church pays me enough for all that I do around here?" Why is this such a profound question? It was relevant to the needs of the man providing the services, right?

It is profound because, for years, he diligently worked to serve the church without any thought of compensation. He served the church because it brought him joy to be able to do something to help others. He never complained, he just served with a willing heart. No one, not even himself, could put a price tag on the joy he had when he served. However, when a price tag was placed before his eyes, he replaced his joy of service with the desire for compensation.

When we replace the joy of service with the need for being seen or monetary compensation, we devalue the work we do for the Lord. Our service for Him then becomes a burden and a yoke rather than a joy for advancing His kingdom. The need of being recognized for our efforts only lures us into a pit of despair when we do not receive, what we perceive as just compensation. We stop recognizing that our real reward can only be given by the King Himself.

I can honestly say that I have never seen the body of Christ, busier than it is now. Churches are filled with programs for its members from senior adults to children. There is no lack of activities for anyone to be involved with. I believe that this is, in part, because there is not a lack of great resources for the modern believer in Jesus Christ.

Many of these activities include vacation Bible school for our youth, camping trips for whoever wishes to attend, teen retreats, senior trips, ski trips, chicken plate sales, yard sales, music practice, home fellowship groups, concerts of our favorite Christian artists, and even evangelistic meetings of our favorite ministers. The list could go on but I think we get the point.

Every one of these events have the potential of bringing someone closer to the Lord, building unity within a specific church body, or even getting different churches to work together. With all of this "busyness", what would happen if we actually took a step back to evaluate our results? What do we really hope to accomplish with all that we are doing? And last but not least, what would God say in a performance evaluation of our "work" for the kingdom? I know that these are tough questions but we need to take a look at our "works" and judge them with the Word of God.

Before I go any further, please don't get the idea that I am against any of the things that I previously mentioned. Every one of them has a measure of merit and there are people being drawn to the Lord by them.

So let us look at the Word of God to see how works measure up to His works. It says in John 10:24, 25, *"Then came the Jews round about Him, and said unto Him, How long will you make us to doubt? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and you do not believe: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me."* And then in verse 38 Jesus said, *"but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him."*

Okay, what am I getting at with these verses? Jesus was very plain to the Jews that surrounded Him. He said that His works had one purpose, to glorify His Father. With works that glorify the Father, they will bear witness of the one doing the works. They will show that the one doing the works and the Father have become one, but not for the sake of the works. In other words, when we do something for the Lord, we don't become one with Him because of what we do, but because of our unselfish devotion to His glory. One could say to me that James 2:24 says, *"You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only"*. Yes, if we were to look at this verse standing alone, we could be made to believe that this is true. However, we cannot allow this verse to stand by itself. The preceding verses say that our works are an extension, or an outpouring of our faith. Works that come from our faith strictly follow what Jesus spoke about in John chapter 10 above. This chapter in James also said that our faith has to have an outpouring of works that glorify the Father or our faith will be dead.

How will our faith die without works? Without works being poured out from our faith, we will not have an understanding of our purpose within the kingdom of God. Without purpose we will stop seeing the hand of God moving in our lives. Without purpose, we will be living without direction. Without purpose and direction there is no hope, and without hope death quickly follows. It is not just important to be built up in the faith but to seek opportunities to share our faith and give God the glory.

James was correct in saying that we are not just justified by our faith alone but often times we misunderstand the balance needed between works and faith. We become so inundated with works of duty rather than works of faith and calling, that we lose sight of why we are serving God.

The main problem we have is believing that we have to do things to please God or earn His love. This belief is completely unfounded and is contrary to the Word of God. There is absolutely nothing that we can do to make God love us any more than He already does. There is nothing that we could have done to stop Jesus from going to the cross on our behalf.

We have been freely given the grace of God without any requirement to do anything but accept the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins. God's grace has been mentioned as His unmerited favor over us. In other words, we did not deserve to have our sin debt paid for. This work that Jesus did on the cross was for our benefit and the glory of His Father. The reason He endured the cross for us was the joy that was set before Him. (Heb. 12:2)

The reason that we cannot be justified by our works is because they will end up becoming opportunities for us to boast about what we are doing for God. Our faith is to produce action but we must always remember that our actions are for the glory of God. I believe

that God would rather have people express their faith in complete anonymity than pronouncing what we do for the praise of men.

Matt. 6:16-18 says, *“Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. ¹⁷But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.* Jesus is talking about individuals who performed works of faith as if other people were their audience.

These efforts may have started out for the glory of God but eventually became opportunities to get attention and sympathy rather than to seek the face of God. Their reward was the admiration of men rather than an incorruptible reward from heaven.

Our works can't be an object of our boasting. God is the One who deserves and should be the object of our boasts. When our faith results in an outpouring of works, we will not be consumed by the idea of drawing attention to ourselves. Rather, faith produced works don't desire any attention but that which should be directed at God.

When our faith produces works we are operating from a debt free life to please the Father. What do I mean by this? When our only motive for our “Faith Works” is to please the Father, we are not in bondage to our works. When our works become an attempt to please the Father, because He has a reward for us, we have then inherited a debt that we cannot work hard enough to pay. When we worry more about getting stars in our heavenly crowns than actually doing something just because we want to give God more glory, we have lost sight of why our faith produces its works.

If all we do is worry about our reward in heaven we place ourselves in a position of competition with others for God's favor. We will become like the servants in Matthew 20. In this chapter, the servants who began work at the beginning of the day were mad that the servants hired at the end of the day received the same pay as them. The master said that the wages were His to give out. The same goes with the rewards that God has laid up in heaven; they are His to hand out. We are not in competition with anyone for God's favor.

In John 14:12, Jesus said, *“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father”.* What works will we be doing that Jesus did but in more abundance?

When Jesus read from the book of Isaiah in Luke 4:18, He proclaimed these as some of the works He was called to do in His Father's name: *He was anointed to preach the gospel to the poor; He was sent to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recover sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are bruised; and to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.*

So, if we want to do works that bring glory to the Father we should start off with these. We should be preaching the gospel and bringing people into the kingdom for His glory. We should be healing the broken hearted for His glory. We should be proclaiming that there is liberty and freedom in the Lord to those who are held captive to sin. We should be opening the eyes of those who are blind. We should be praying for the healing of those who are physically blind; however, we should also be filled up with His Word and anointed to open the eyes of them who are spiritually blind.

John chapter 9 discusses both types of blindness and I encourage you to read this for understanding. We should be finding those who are bruised/broken and setting them free with the Word of God. We should be preaching the acceptable year of the Lord and doing it all in love.

How do we do these things if we do not know where to start? There are four references in the book of Matthew and Mark that says Jesus was moved with compassion. This compassion was not conjured up from His own desire and purpose. It ties directly in with His love and passion for His Father as I wrote about earlier in the chapter.

When our faith for God expands into a passion for Him, we will produce works that will bring Him glory. Out of our passion for Him we will develop compassion and love for the lost, broken hearted, the captives, those who are blind and those that are bruised. Out of our compassion, God will anoint us to do His work and people will be drawn closer to Him.

The glorious thing about all of this is that when we operate with this anointing we will not have a desire to be seen or glorified. Our desire will be for people to see God only.

I once had a woman come up to me and asked, "What can I do to serve within this body?" As first I was a little taken back by her question but quickly gathered my wit's and shared with her these things. I told her to take some time to pray for God to show her what needs to be done and write them down.

Then she needed to pray about what was on the list and go to the pastor and talk to him about what she saw and what she wanted to do. If God showed her that we needed help cleaning the bathrooms, be willing to do so. If God showed her that she needed to clean the church, be willing to do so. I told her that the key was to do whatever He said with a joyful heart and willing to go without any praise.

I did share with the pastor the conversation that she and I had so he could be prepared for her if she went to him at a later date. A couple of weeks later, after a church service, I saw the woman cleaning the bathrooms. I approached her and thanked her for what she was doing. My prayer is that she, and anyone else who starts a work for the Lord, understands that it is never about the work or the worker; it is always about the One that we are doing the work for. While others may never see our efforts, God sees everything and takes great joy in the willing heart of a servant.

Lack of Discipleship

I will never forget my time in the United States Marine Corps. At one time, I really wanted to forget, but that desire has given way to the pride of serving my country. Basic training was, to say the least, a real challenge to everyone who placed their feet on the yellow foot prints. Before anyone makes it to the recruit training depot there are thoughts of, “What have I gotten myself in to” and “I’m not sure I can do this”. Even with a little preparation, no one is fully prepared for what they will go through during this time.

So why do people charge head long into an unknown reality, knowing that they will be yelled at, punished, endure a mountain of physical stress and otherwise have who they are removed to become a new man or woman? For me, it was kind of a family thing. My dad was in the Army, and I had an uncle, a cousin and a brother, all join the Marines. I also knew it was time to leave home, although I just graduated high school. I knew that my parents had done what they needed to do to prepare me, so with a grateful heart, I set out to chart my course.

There is also something else that draws people into the military, and that is structure and discipline. There is a great history behind every military branch that was built by great men and women. This history is taught in Marine Corps basic training so every recruit understands how it all started, why they exist and also, many of the great battles that the United States Marines played a significant role in a particular war.

But, could you imagine a military that did not teach its recruits about their incredible history or purpose? Could you imagine a military that does not train its men and women about the veterans of the past; the ones that built upon the foundations laid down by its founders? The thought is almost unfathomable.

This history is necessary to ensure that everyone, who puts on a military uniform, understands why they worked so hard to become a member of their particular branch. Without this knowledge, the meaning would be useless and the forces would not be able to stand in the necessary unity to fight every battle toward victory.

It is more than just dressing up in a uniform and looking like a soldier, but also knowing the who, what, when, where and why they put that uniform on. Well, the same holds true for every believer in Jesus. We all need to learn and know why we believe what we believe. Without proper knowledge of this truth, we will not be able to defend our faith or tell someone else about our faith in Jesus.

The only way to make sure that all believers understand their individual purpose, and the purpose of the body of Christ, is through discipleship. People need to be trained to understand that God did more than save them from hell. There has to be an understanding that salvation is more than an experience at the cross of Christ.

In Matthew 28:19, 20, Jesus said *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”*.

We must be about the work of making disciples, but how do we do that if we, ourselves, don’t really know what it means to make disciples? A disciple is a person who studies and follows the teachings of another; a student. Discipleship can take place in any of the following; religion, athletics, academics and business.

True discipleship continues the knowledge and understanding of a subject or doctrine as long as someone keeps teaching the subject matter. If there is a lack of discipleship, knowledge fades. Hosea 4:6 says, *“My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.”*

Many years ago, I received a vision from the Lord. In this vision I saw a child like you would see in a commercial for humanitarian aid needed for another country. This child was very thin in his body but his stomach was extremely large. It was obvious to me that this child was malnourished so I could not fully grasp what God was revealing to me.

When I asked Him about the significance of this child, He told me that He wanted me to see what His church actually looks like. When I asked what He meant, He told me that because of the stomach, this child looked fat but was not fat at all. This child had a distended stomach due to a real lack of nutrition.

Medically speaking, the lack of protein in their diets was the main cause of this condition. He said that His church looks very much like the child He was showing me. The church looks fat, but was suffering from malnutrition. He said that the churches are full of people but void of proper discipleship.

He said that the church was really busy at making converts but not disciples. In other words, we are gathering people within the four walls of our buildings but we are not doing much to change them into the image of Christ. When I say “we”, I am not singling out any particular church or denomination.

There are consequences that we as individuals and the church are reaping because we are not properly sowing in to the lives of believers. Without proper discipleship training, many believers will not learn the basic disciplines of following Jesus Christ.

Without true structured discipleship, many believers are left to their own devices to learn the Word of God. When that happens, they will not know where to look for answers or know if the answers are correct. They are left to seeking out sources of truth without the assurances that these places really offer truth.

So how did we get here? I had a former pastor preach one time about how we go astray from the foundation of truth. In his illustration, he used a chair standing on the floor. He explained that this chair represented an established truth with its foundations set in four corners. He began to tell us that if we begin to teach a doctrine that only has some truth to it, we begin to deceive the hearers of that word.

He then moved the chair by pivoting it on one leg. He proclaimed that we stayed true to the foundation because we were still connected at the corner of the foundation. He then said that if some years go by without checking accuracy of the teaching, the people will not remember that the chair is not on its original foundation.

Then, if we allow more false teaching to take place we will pivot the chair, on one leg, and maintain that we are still connected to the original foundation at one corner. He did this several times until the chair was about five feet from where it started.

This is most unfortunate because many people don't know the truth from a lie, because they don't know God's Word. But here is a truth that you need to highlight; if a teacher has little understanding about what they are teaching they will only breed less understanding. Too many years of misguided teaching is followed by an epidemic of unhealthy believer in Christ.

Every facet of society has training. Our children go to school to get a good education. At my place of employment we have training for everything you can think of. Our doctors have to be trained in either general medicine or become a specialist. Pilots have to be trained to fly airplanes. We also have to be trained and licensed to drive our cars.

Everyone gets trained to do something and yet we seem to think that we don't need any training in the Word of God to get ordained in ministry. People are getting ordained over the internet, or some other quick way, and think that they are qualified to handle the responsibilities of the office.

The people, who get ordained without the proper training and discipleship, will find themselves in situations where they will cause more harm than good. There is also a difference between being called and being ready for the call. You could say, "God doesn't call the equipped. He equips the called". While this is true, discipleship is showing good stewardship toward those who walk with Christ.

We can almost take a look at it in this fashion. What would happen if, after parents had their children, they left them to fend for themselves? The children would not last very long. Children need to receive instruction about learning how to be God fearing, productive citizens. Even if parents do not teach them about the Lord, there are still some things that children need to know about life. The same goes for people who give their hearts to the Lord.

There are some basic things that they need to learn in the transition they face from not knowing the Lord to elementary Christian living. From there they will need to learn about victorious living in Christ. Without this discipleship, many new believers in Christ will often times turn back to their old way of life because it is what seems familiar.

They may realize that there is a need to do something different with their lives, but without any coaching from churches or strong believers, these new believers may find it easier to live the old life. The life of any believer in Christ is not void of trials because of their new faith in Him. If new believers do not get the proper training from God's Word, they will not have a clear understanding on how to get through the trials.

If there is not a clear path to follow, they will easily get lost. It says in Psalm 119:105 that the Word of God is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Whether it is new or seasoned faith, God's Word demonstrates how to walk this path toward victory. Without a proper understanding of how to use the light of His Word, any one of us can be tripped up by what is hiding in darkness.

While it can be difficult to bring people to the Lord, getting people saved is really the easy part. Sometimes certain barriers need to be broken in an individual before they give their heart to Christ. Then why do I say that getting them saved is the easy part? I equate it with having children.

When a couple gets married and decides to have children, the easiest thing they can do is bring the child into the world. The real challenge is raising the child to become a productive member of society. For every positive influence a parent tries to instill into their child, they are bombarded with something opposite that teaches the child to do something negative. Raising children is a challenge for parents today. It is also a challenge for new believers to grow in Christ because a lot of them have to do it on their own.

What are some of the things that believers need to learn in discipleship training? New believers need to be taught that God is their source in everything and He will take care of

them. This would include training about how their faith will sometimes be tested, stretched and even at the brink of failure but God will provide. They need to be taught who they are in Christ. That God has redeemed them from the curse of the law and calls them His own. They need to learn how to live a life of Holiness and why it is so important to do so.

They need to know that they are called the sons and daughters of God, kings and priests of His kingdom. They should know that they now have the power of the Holy Spirit upon them to overcome the enemy of their souls.

We have weapons of warfare that enable us to build positive relationships with others while overcoming the influence of the enemy. This list only scratches the surface of what we can learn about God and who we are in His Word, but gives us a start to walking a victorious life in Christ.

Whatever program or discipleship training that a church offers, the leadership of that church must check its teachings with the Word of God. They also need to be committed to keep this training available to all levels of believers. The Word of God has to be the foundation of ALL truth. We cannot promote any doctrines above the Word of God. We have to promote the Word of God within any program, whether it is discipleship training, outreach ministry, mission's ministry or music ministry.

This is our foundation, the truth and the path in which all believers must learn and follow toward God. Other than prayer, real discipleship is the only thing that we can do to steer the church in the right direction. It is the only way for the body of Christ to fully understand God's Word and effectively use it to overcome the enemy.

If discipleship training is left lacking, we will surely see its negative effects on the church. It will bind us from reaching the fullness of God, and the fullness of the body of Christ. God has ordained great things to happen through His people, but we must first know the heart of God. We know the heart of God as we learn the Word of God. We learn the Word of God through discipleship.

Seeking Praise

In the movie, *The Karate Kid*, and either version will apply, but for my example, I will use the original characters since it dates to my teenage years. When Daniel began his training under Miyagi, he became confused about the training methods and did not see how they applied to Karate. Miyagi had Daniel wash his cars with the infamous, “*Wax on-Wax off*” method. Daniel was instructed to paint Miyagi’s fence with purposeful up and down strokes. When Daniel wanted to hit something, Miyagi had him doing chores. After many days or weeks of “working” for Miyagi, he had finally reached his limit and confronted his teacher. Miyagi then showed Daniel why he was washing cars and painting fences instead of fighting. Miyagi attacked Daniel and gave him instructions to wax on and wax off, and paint the fence. Much to Daniels amazement, he was able to fend off his attacker.

Miyagi was not teaching Daniel how to be a painter or a car detailer; he was teaching him discipline when his work did not make sense. He was teaching Daniel to trust that the instruction given to him, although it seemed stupid and unnecessary, was of great benefit in time of the battle.

We seem to get hung up on the idea that we have to, or even think that we can earn God’s favor, and in that, work for the praise of men. It seems to be that if we do not get recognized for our efforts, we are a failure to the Lord and a ministry. Before I go any further, let me say that I have ridden this roller coaster before and have enabled the enemy of my soul to remove me from my calling.

Working without affirmation, when it is so desired, can leave us feeling as if we have wasted our time. Believe me, there is nothing worse than wasting your time when performing a task. Yet, there are times that we need to do things, even if we cannot tell their effectiveness for the kingdom of God.

God has called each one of us to work for Him with a calling and a purpose to glorify Him. There are times that His instructions lead us down roads that do not make sense, but we have to trust that He is taking us to higher levels in Him. Since we are limited to spiritual short sightedness it is hard for us to fully understand why God has us do something or go through something.

There are times that we have to go through the hard places because they break things off that cannot go where He is taking us. Those things that need broken from us will ultimately hinder the work that God is preparing for us if they remain unchecked.

What do I mean? When Joseph received the first vision that his family would bow down to him, neither he, nor his family understood what it meant. He had a slightly inflated ego and his family was ready to deflate that ego. God took Joseph through some places that made him ready to serve in his calling. After God had completed His work in Joseph, he was fully prepared to lead the nation of Egypt and his family through the famine.

I remember the testimony of Rush Limbaugh when he was the director of public relations with the Kansas City Royals baseball team. There was a time when he thought that he was “the man”. He believed that he was the reason why the fans filled the stadium during each game. Then the epiphany hit him right between the eyes. As he

stood on the pitcher's mound preparing to introduce the individual who was going to throw the first pitch, he looked at all of the fans in the stadium.

It was at that moment he realized that none of those people were there to see him. They came to watch the professional baseball players, hired by the team, to represent their beloved city. Once awakened by this truth, he realized that if he did everything he could to make the team more prosperous, he would be prosperous. This epiphany made him understand that his efforts behind the scenes, though unrecognized by the masses, would ultimately bring reward.

How does this apply to our Christian walk and service to the Lord? Not everything that we do for the Lord has to be recognized. Let me make one clarification of the previous statement. God sees everything and in His timing, will reward us as He sees fit. The problem we have is when we do not see His gratefulness we seek the gratefulness from men.

When we do not receive applause or recognition from men either, we get frustrated and are ready to jump ship. This is a completely unhealthy relationship with the Lord and with others; because we stop trusting the Lord and those He has placed around us. It will lead to failure because we get out of the covering that God desires to place over us, and allow the enemy to seduce us from the place of proper growth in Him.

Let's look at it this way. When a woman gives birth to a child prematurely, the doctors will provide a lot of special attention to this child because it is not ready to go home with its parents. There are times when a child needs to be placed in an incubator, which provides a controlled environment to protect him/her from the outside environment.

This time in incubation provides the necessary time for a medical staff to monitor their final development of keratin in the skin. Keratin is the fibrous structural protein that makes our outer layer of skin. If a new born child does not have the proper development of its skin, it will be susceptible to infection and disease.

How does this apply to us as believers? There are times when we may feel like we are ready to be launched into ministry because we have done a few things for the Lord. However, God may place us in an incubator to give us time to grow in a more controlled environment so we can have proper development of our gifts. The time of incubation will vary from person to person but is still very vital to the growth and development in our calling. It may even get to the point where we want to break down the door that seems to be holding us back, but that can lead to destruction.

As an example, a chicken that has been cooked but has not finished may taste good, but is prime for someone to become deathly ill. What may look done on the outside can kill someone if it has not become complete on the inside. The same applies to believers and their call to ministry. If we have the appearance of being finished because we do and say many of the right things, does not equate to us being ready on the inside. It is so easy for us to make others believe that we are done but we need to remember that God does not cook with a microwave. We also need to remember that it is God who calls us and equips us for ministry and it is God who determines the method of our preparation and the timing of our release.

Some people will teach us to never pray for patience because God will make us work out our patience. I firmly believe that we need to have our patience tried because it is in these trials that God molds us into the perfect image of His Son. James 1:4 says, "*But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.*"

When our patience gets a work out from the Lord, He is working to complete us. When He completes our patience, He completes us. And, when He completes us, we will be made perfect and lack nothing. When we lack nothing, we have been fully prepared for what He has worked to place in front of us. That includes our calling and ministry. Philippians 1:6: *“being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.”*

There are a lot of times, in our Christian walk, that seem to be wasted because we don't see the reward of our efforts. This reward could either be the fruit of our efforts, praise for our efforts, or possibly, spiritual promotion. If we could understand that being a servant of the kingdom of God isn't about the reward, but the rewarder, we would freely give to bring Him the glory.

Our efforts don't advance us or our ministry, God does. But, when God seems to be withholding the reward, why do we seek the praise of men? We can't attain kingdom rewards from men. We need to seek out opportunities to advance the kingdom without any expectations except to bless the Father and draw others to Him.

Borrowed Time

Growing up in my family, we were never short of joking around and developing the short quip to make others laugh. There were a total of seven of us, three boys, two girls and our parents, so we a lot of people to practice on. We picked on each other all of the time and also would joke about other things. As the baby of the family, I tried to keep up with everyone else's joking around, but I was also pretty serious too.

One example of our humor was during the high school years of one of my brothers and me. We were at the high school for something in the schools cafetorium. A cafetorium is a cafeteria with a stage in it for all of the plays and musical events.

As we were preparing to leave the school, one of the teachers had walked back stage to make sure that everything was okay. He came back and said that the back stage light was on and asked, "Does anyone know where to turn the back stage light off?". Without hesitation, my brother said, "Just tie a knot in the cord." Everyone burst out in laughter, but it took that teacher a few seconds to understand the magnitude of what my brother had said. What makes that so funny to me now is the fact that my brother is an electrician where he and I work.

Several years ago I was with my brother when he had asked to borrow something. The person did not mind if my brother borrowed this thing, but asked, "How long will you need it?" Again, my brother was pretty quick to the punch and said, "The whole time." There are two things that we borrow and need all that we can possess, money and time. We borrow more money than we can possibly pay back, and we desire more time than we can possibly use. To borrow a phrase, no pun intended, we are living on borrowed time.

There is something quite curious about time. Everyone has been given the same amount of time in each day, and most everyone says that they don't have enough of it. I wish I had more time to work with, but I don't think I would be satisfied with that either. Think about it, how many times during the course of our work day do we hear, "Come on 4:30." It seems that we are in such a hurry to leave work, that we don't take the time to be thankful for our jobs. Instead, we look at it as a necessary evil so we can have money to play with. So why do we take time for granted? Why do we not see this gift for what it really is?

As each year seems to go by us at an ever increasingly faster pace, and we find ourselves scrambling to figure out where our time has gone. When December comes around, and the year nearly spent we are forced to do a few things. One, it causes us to scurry around like mindless little minions of the Christmas shopping frenzy. Two, we reflect on the year and evaluate how things have gone for us. And finally, we have to begin making plans and prognostications for the next year with the hopes of making it better than this past year.

What can we actually do with the time we have been given by the Lord? Can we change the past or posses the future? What can we really do? Do we have any control of our allotted time? Let's take a few minutes of this precious commodity called time to find out.

Business managers, college students and countless others have taken time management courses in an effort to maximize their productive output in each given day. They are taught to make a log of their activities to see where they have misused any time during

their work schedule. I have done this as well and was amazed to find time that I had wasted during the day. These kinds of classes try to expose this mishandled time and refocus that energy into productive minutes.

Entire companies try this so they can obtain a maximized effort from their work force. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get everyone on board with highly productive work schedules. So what are we to do as individuals and our time? It should be obvious that those who are employed need to be good stewards of their time at work, and those who are unemployed must be diligent at finding work.

Time is not our enemy. We don't have to fear time as if it were the last two minutes of a football or basketball game. However, I believe that being good stewards of the time at hand is a command of the Lord.

Most of us may have heard that powerful business men will not say on their death bed, "I wish that I had spent more time at the office." It is actually quite the opposite. More often than not, the regret is not spending enough time at home, with the family. Yet we believe what society has been saying for so many years, that in order to get ahead, you have to spend more time getting there. We do everything we can to make a good impression to our employers, that we don't make any impression at home. I can't tell you how many times that I have personally wrestled this demon.

There are two songs that come to mind with regard to winning the rat race. The first one, called *Cat's in the Cradle*, was written in 1974 and performed by the late Harry Chapin. It's about a man who, throughout the life of his young son, put work and business in front of his family. The son always vowed to be like his father and ultimately did not have time for his father when he was older.

The second song is called *American Dream* by the group Casting Crowns. It was written in 2004, 40 years after *Cat's in the Cradle* and basically tells the same story. A father has to work hard for the American dream while his son pays the consequences of his father's absence. Will things ever change?

How much time does God get from our day? If we were to give God a tithe of our time, how would the math work out? Since there are 24 hours in a day, we would have to multiply that by .10 to get the total of 2.4 hours. 2.4 hours seems like a lot of time since we are not awake for 24 hours. Ok, I will trim it back a bit with the average time awake being about 16.5 hours a day. That still equates to just over 1.5 hours that should be devoted to the Lord. We have a hard time doing that on Sunday mornings.

We can't get caught up in a particular day, event or act though. We need to have a balance between time in prayer, in His Word, our families and fellowship with other believers. Time devoted to God would also be a good opportunity to live out Matthew 25:35, 36, feeding the hungry, visiting those who are sick or in prison, clothing the poor, etc. Yes, even time with our families is time devoted to the Lord. When we spend time building strong foundations for our family unit, we will strengthen other areas of our communities.

When we limit our time with God, everything else gets out of balance. In addition, we limit how much we let Him work in our lives. However, let me make some clarifications. We can be too busy doing stuff for God too. We can get so busy doing things for church and others in our own efforts/strength, and lose sight of our families. We have to strike a good balance in everything that we do, but we also need to be sensitive to the amount of wasted time that is encompassed with each day.

It is not a sin to work hard for the provisions of your family. In fact, chapters 18, 19 and 20 of Proverbs all discuss the consequences of being a sluggard or lazy. I have also seen the problems of putting work ahead of family. I have seen men willingly work excessive amounts of overtime to provide more for their families. The problem with that is the lack of parental presence within the family. It also reduces the opportunities to be in church and physically supporting the church ministry. With the lack of parental presence in the home, the spiritual strength and foundation is also undermined. 1 Tim. 3:5 states that if a man doesn't know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God.

Within God, time exists. That is part of the reason that His patience is long suffering. Unfortunately, we live in a mortal body that is dictated by the constraints of time. Our lives are but a fleeting moment and our urgency is shorter than that. We have a difficult time waiting on an answer from the Lord because we see the urgency of the matter.

However, God does not watch us from the constraints of a particular moment. He knows the end from the beginning. His vantage point allows Him to give us time to grow into the image of His Son. Working from His time schedule gives us an opportunity to mature in Christ. When we are in the heat of the moment, growing in Christ doesn't sound too appealing but it is absolutely necessary for our victory in Him.

There was a time when someone asked me a very pointed question about the justness of God. I truly believe it was a valid question, and as a matter of fact, I have asked the same question. I told the person that I did not have an answer but would seek God to find out His truth.

So I went to the Lord in prayer and said, "Lord, you heard the question. You have heard me ask the same question. I want an answer." I was pretty blunt, but so was the Lord. He said, "Patrick, the answer is quite simple. You are looking at it from the wrong perspective." He went on to say that the situation needed to be looked at from an eternal perspective.

Simply put, everything needs to be looked at from an eternal perspective. If we only look at everything as it happens before us, we miss out on what God is doing to mold us into His image. With His timing being eternal, He is always waiting on us to catch up to Him, but all too often; we think that we are waiting on God. Yes, our time is borrowed, but the lender owns it all.

He gives us only what we have need of, but sometimes, He will make the world stand still to our needs. Time is precious. We don't need to just stop to smell the roses, we just need to take time to reflect on the eternity of time that God works from.

Making Excuses

I don't remember the show but there was a particular scene that struck me as funny. One character asked another why they did something in particular and their response was a simple "Because". "Because why", the first person asked? Without hesitation they answered, "Because, because." We always seem to have a reason for doing everything but we don't always have good reasons. Most children will usually use the phrase, "I don't know." And as parents, we seem to reach our wits end fairly quickly when we do not receive the answers that we are looking for.

We often wonder where these lame excuses come from when attempting to get to the bottom of a matter. What I find amazing is how creative many reasons, or excuses can become. I also wonder if the first person that used the excuse of, "My dog ate my homework" really had their homework eaten by the dog. We may never know about that one but excuses go back to the Garden of Eden.

In Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve had eaten fruit from the tree that God had told them not to eat from. When God began to look for them, they hid themselves because of their nakedness. God asked them who it was that told them they were naked. God then asked if they had eaten from the tree that He commanded them not to eat.

Adam, with great poise and diplomacy, threw Eve under the bus. He said, "The woman, who you gave to me, gave me the fruit and I ate it". His excuse cost him everything. His attempt to blame Eve, for his mistake, did nothing to wipe away the uncleanness that had caused their separation from God.

God was not pleased, but never stopped loving them because their sin. This is evident by the fact the God offered the first sacrifice as atonement for their sin. Rather than "man up", admit his mistake and ask for forgiveness, Adam started throwing blame. Therefore, it became human nature for us to make excuses for our mistakes.

What happened in the garden does not mean that God created an imperfect man. Adam was still made in the image of God. Yet, what it does show is the fact that we need God at the center of all our decisions so we can reside in His perfect will.

How can our excuses keep God from working as He desires in our lives? What kinds of reasoning propel us from the center of His heart and lost in our own despair? Let us continue with the sin of Adam as the foundation for our excuse making.

As we have discussed, Adam's excuse that the woman God had given him was flawed. "It was all her fault", Adam said. This kind of excuse is called the blame game. It is when we are confronted with something and we try to make it someone else's fault. It is amazing how much of our own short comings are the fault of others.

How many of us refrain from doing something because we are intimidated at who is around us? I will be the first to raise my hand. When it comes to playing the drums, especially when I was new at the craft, I had a hard time playing in front of other drummers; especially if they were any good.

Just a few years ago, I became very nervous playing in front of the wife of a really good drummer. I played horribly that night because of what I thought she would think. I blamed her for my lack of confidence in what God has allowed me to do on the drums. By blaming her, I threw the anointing of God right out the window.

We also blame others for our lack of productivity. I recently heard someone say that they did not need to finish a school project because everyone else wasn't going to finish either. We believe that since others are not going to do something then it is acceptable for us to lower our own standards.

Why do we think that it is okay to give God subpar performance because we perceive that the bar set by man is high enough? Believe me, I get caught in this trap as well because I think that what others are doing for the Lord is good enough for me. I blame that status quo for my lack of doing things according to God's Word. But with God, that is unacceptable.

I remember saying to my parents, "Well so and so is doing it, why can't I?" Their response was, "We are not their parents and their parents are not responsible for the consequences of your actions." They tried to set the standards of the Bucksot children at a high enough level that would make us, not just good kids, but kids of good report.

I know that I was not a perfect kid, but I did always weigh out what my parents would think if I did something at a lower standard than their expectation of me. Keeping their expectations in the back of my mind kept me out of a lot of trouble. The same thing applies with the Lord. If we would keep God's expectations running through our minds, we would stay out of a lot of trouble and not have to blame someone else for our bad behavior.

Over all, Christians get blamed by more people for their life style than any other group. In some ways I can understand but a person's behavior ultimately rests on the individual's choice and not the behavior of others. For example, have you ever heard this statement, "Did you see what that person did? I thought that they were supposed to be a Christian." I have on more than one occasion. My first thought when I do here it is this; if they recognize a standard that is not being met by a Christian, then why aren't they trying to live up to that standard? What they don't understand is that they are blaming a Christian for their lack of righteousness.

The same thing goes for why some people don't go to church. They gave it a shot and they saw imperfect people doing imperfect things for a God who is perfect. They saw back biting, stealing, fighting etc. and these things became their excuse for not making a personal commitment to live their lives for Christ.

They don't understand that a commitment to Christ is personal and based on their own individual needs. They recognize their faults but fail to make a commitment to change because of someone else's shortcomings. Do we, as a global body need to do better? Of course we do. We do need to live up to God's standard of righteousness but because we are in a battle with our flesh, we will fail. But the truth remains that we need to rise up to the standard that God has set before us.

We must come to the understanding that excuses undermine the integrity of the heart. When we continually make excuses, we lose credibility with others. I understand that we will fall short of the expectations of others, and God, but we have to be able to own up to these failures and do our best to do better.

We can't rest on past successes and think that we are as good as we'll ever be. We have to believe that there is always room for growth in every area of our lives. With God's grace on our side this is not an impossible thing to accomplish. The thing is this, we generously desire for God to impart His grace toward us, but we must be willing to impart His grace toward others.

As we evaluate the path of our lives, we need to begin eliminating excuses because they will hinder our growth as a person and our growth in the Lord. Imagine that you want to go on a trip and make all of the plans to get to your desired destination. The airline tickets have been purchased, the bags have been packed and there is gas in the car for the ride to the airport, but when it comes time to leave, you never get into the car. Everything has been done but the leaving.

You can't make the trip of a lifetime if you never get into the car. This is what excuses do for us. They bind us to now without any hope for a future. But God knows our future. He never made any excuses for us, even in the midst of our sin. He just made a way for us to back into a right relationship with Him.

Don't let excuses steal your possibilities, because every possibility is a gem in our lives that is meant to enrich us for the glory of God's kingdom. Some would say, "We are bigger than failure", but I'm not so sure that is the case. We are only greater because 1 John 4:4 says, "*You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world.*" God is the greatness that lives on the inside of us; He is the creator of our possibilities and in all things, leads us toward Himself.

Heart of Prejudice

When I was in the United States Marine Corps, I had my first encounter with prejudice; at least as far as I remember. I was in a supply warehouse at Cherry Point Air Station, and was approached by a man who blamed me for the slavery of black people more than 100 years prior to that date.

I was kind of shocked at the accusation as I personally could not have had anything to do with slavery. His heart was filled with bitterness as I tried to explain that some of my ancestors fought in the Union Army. For me, this moment in my life was not a pleasant memory, as I was seeing how prejudice had placed a stranglehold on our society. I won't say that this young man was prejudice, but was suffering from its wrath in America.

When most people think about the word prejudice, their minds will probably go to the struggles between black and white people. Although it has been nearly 50 years since Dr. Martin Luther King's, "*I Have A Dream*" speech, there is still tension and prejudice between some people in these two groups. As you will read, prejudice is not just a problem between the afore mentioned groups, but is a deep-seated problem between many cultures and groups.

I will say from the start that I am not a proponent of political correctness because it only creates a greater divide between people and cultures. I also do not believe in the politically correct labels placed on the different groups of people that are representative of our culture. These labels do nothing but further divide a nation that is supposed to be the beacon of freedom to the world.

As believers in Christ, if we truly love God and follow the commandments of His Word, we will not need labels, political correctness, or class warfare. We will operate by the love and grace that is commanded by the Word of God. To explain this point further, I recommend that everyone read Romans chapter 12.

Before we dive too deeply into this, we have to understand what prejudice is and where it comes from. Prejudice is when an individual or group has formed preconceived ideas or opinions (negative or positive) toward another individual or group without factual truth. It can be based on a number of things. These include but are not limited to a person's race, religion/denomination, appearance, gender, marital status, or occupation.

People will often form an opinion, based on their perception, about someone or a group without digging in to find any merit to those opinions. These formed opinions can lead either to positive relationships or to arrogance, pride or even hatred in extreme cases.

When hatred is the result of an uninformed opinion, prejudice rules the heart. Unfortunately, prejudice that is passed through the generations is often maintained with an ignorance of why it even exists.

I am not saying that we all need to go through diversity training but we do need to take Holy Spirit training on how to love people where they are, and for who God had created them to be. We have to remember that we do not always have it all pulled together. If we honestly look in the mirror, we will find enough of our own flaws to work on, much less try to change others. In fact, if we allow God to work on our own flaws and weaknesses, our vision may change enough that other people begin to look better to us.

If we will think back, not too long ago, God found us in a pit of despair. We were lost and needed God to save us from our sins. We were made in His image but without form

and void. We had the outward appearance of the man or woman that God had created but we were empty of His Spirit and His purpose in our lives. Without His Spirit or purpose living within us, we will never live up to all that He has planned in our lives.

The heavens and the earth were also made this same way, without form and void, until God fine-tuned His creation. Heaven and earth were formed but without His Spirit and His purpose, it was not inhabitable. When God reached down with His grace and mercy, He began to fine-tune our lives into His original design for us. When we remember our past, we should realize that the attitude of thinking we are better than anyone else has no place in our hearts.

Prejudice against others causes us to think that a particular person or group cannot attain a higher status in life. When we do this, we limit them from reaching their maximum potential. Inside of every person is a purpose and a calling. It is our job, as believers, to reveal that calling and purpose and draw it out. We have to remember a time when we had a burning in our hearts for someone to notice that special something within us.

Until our purpose is recognized, we tend to feel trapped because we were not given the opportunity to live out our calling. The same thing applies to those we don't believe has any greatness within them. We need stop looking at the outward appearance and ask God to show us their heart and their potential. We also need to ask the Lord to use us to be an encourager of the body.

I am reminded of the parable of the publican and the Pharisee (Luke 18:9-14). When the Pharisee prayed, his display of prejudice toward others was detested by the Lord. His entire prayer was an attempt to tell God how good he was and how bad everyone else was. When we look at others as if we are better than them, in any way, it is prejudice and sin. There is no room for that in the hearts of believers.

Prejudice within the body of Christ disrupts the unity that is needed to destroy the works of the enemy. Our unity is the key to the world seeing that the Father sent Jesus. Read John 17:20-26. When the world sees prejudice, it cannot see Christ. This prejudice doesn't even have to be between denominations.

Individuals professing to be Christians and displaying prejudice, openly or privately are being used of the enemy to cause confusion. This thought follows what Jesus said in Matthew 5:28, "But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart." If we are privately prejudiced toward others, we are openly prejudiced before God.

Jesus said in John 8:31-32, "*If you abide in My Word, you are my disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free*". Do you see that abiding in His Word will make us His disciples? Let us also look John chapter 13. Jesus tells us of a new commandment that we should live by. Starting in verse 34 Jesus said, "*A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this **all** will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*".

The love that we are supposed to have for one another is not confined to our local church. He is referring to a global love. Yes, He does mean for believers to have a special bond of love that is recognized as something different, but the world will not react to His love if we bottle our love into a building full of only people with whom we identify.

Paul also touched on this in I Timothy 5:21. He wrote, "*I charge you before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that you observe these things without*

preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality". When we make the Word of God the focal point of all of our relationships, we can and will love without partiality (prejudice).

Galatians 5:6 says, "*Faith works by love.*" If we walk with a prejudice heart, our faith in God is in jeopardy. Our hearts cannot provide the same source for love, and pride. When we truly love as Jesus loved, we cannot walk in pride. And when we walk in pride, we cannot truly love. Jesus said in Matthew chapter 7, ¹⁷"*Even so every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸A good tree cannot bear bad fruit and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown in to the fire. ²⁰Therefore by their fruits you will know them*". Also consider Luke 6:45, "*A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.*"

Every one of us wrestles with prejudice of some form or another but we need to make a decision today to give this vile wretchedness to God. In II Corinthians 5:17-21 it reads, "*Therefore, if anyone is reconciled to Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold all things have become new. Now, all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the Word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*".

What does all that mean? It means that we are a new creation and he wants to use us to bring reconciliation to the world. If we cannot get past the outward appearance of a man or woman then our own hearts are in bondage as well, and we are deceived. If we cannot get past the outward appearance of a person and see a heart that needs to be set free, we will not be used of God and their hearts will remain in bondage. Also, our hearts will be bound because we are withholding the most precious gift of the Gospel due to our inability to get beyond a person's appearance.

I once read a sign at a business that read, "If you want to change the world, start with yourself." There are many of us that have big dreams of being used by the Lord to bring change in the world around us. This can only happen if we allow God to change our view of the world from our perspective to His perspective. We need to allow Him to show us how much He truly loves us by giving us His love to others.

We won't allow that to happen if we close our eyes to the needs of others. We won't allow that to happen if we close our eyes to the hurts of others. And lastly, we won't let that happen if we close our eyes to the areas from which He has delivered us.

When we open up those victories in our own lives and then share them with others, it brings more people closer to the love of the Father. When that happens, the enemy loses. So let us bring victory to our lives by helping others achieve victory in their lives no matter who they are.

When I had my first, real encounter with prejudice, so many years ago, I could hardly imagine what some people must go through that deal with it every day. I felt bad for the guy who brought the accusation against me, but I also know that he was just taking an opportunity to lash out, and I happened to be the one who received his frustrations.

There are those who never get that moment to rise up above the challenges that others put on them. As a body of Christ, we are called to exhort our brothers and sisters and defend the defenseless. We can all overcome the spirit of prejudice by walking in the Spirit of God. Be the example of His love so others can see what His love is supposed to look like.

Spiritual Astigmatism

When I was in the fourth grade, I began to have trouble with reading the chalk board. Yes, I am that old. Nearly everything that the teacher wrote on the board was a struggle for me to read. As I talked with my parents, I tried suggesting that I was just too far back and needed to be moved closer to the front of the room. While that was a possibility, they decided to have my eyes checked out by the eye doctor. Sure enough, I needed to have glasses. After getting my new glasses, I was amazed at how much clearer everything became.

After a few years with glasses, it was determined that I needed to get contact lenses to help stabilize my eyes because they had developed astigmatism. The prescription in my eyes was changing so fast that the doctor was worried that I would be in bifocals by the time I was 18 years old.

While the wearing of contacts took some time to get used to, they ultimately slowed down the progression of my worsening vision. My contacts were the hard lenses, and they would shape my eyes to help them see properly. Whenever I would go back to wearing glasses before bed time, I could not see that well, even though the contacts and glasses had the same prescription.

The reason that this transition was so extreme was the fact that my contacts combated the astigmatism by reshaping my cornea. When I took them out, it took a while for my eyes to shape back into a relaxed position. So, when I put my glasses on, my eyes were still shaped for the contact lenses. After a few hours without the contact lenses in, everything was back to normal, and I could see with my glasses. This astigmatism was creating a lot of havoc in my life, because even with corrective lenses, it was difficult to change between two different kinds of correction.

According to the American Optometric Association, astigmatism is a condition that causes blurred vision due to either the irregular shape of the cornea or to the curvature of the lens inside the eye. The result of the irregular shape of the cornea or lens is light being prevented from properly focusing on the retina. While a slight astigmatism usually does not need correction, more severe cases can cause distorted or blurred vision, eye discomfort, or even headaches.

As with near sightedness and far sightedness; astigmatism is correctible through the use of glasses, contact lenses or even surgery. The main goal is to get light to refract into your eyes correctly; to allow them to focus as designed. So it is also with our spiritual lives. God desires for us to allow His light, into our scope of vision, to help us focus on His plan and purpose, so we can see as He sees.

How does astigmatism affect our spiritual vision? It is not really astigmatism at this point but what we do when we look upon “sinners” is “Stigmatize” their sin rather than loving them. What do I mean by stigmatizing their sin? When we look at someone, who is caught up in a particular sin, and then pass judgment upon them, we have labeled the individual based on our own perceptions rather than through the love of God.

There are so many examples of this in the Word of God but I will only give you one to ponder. In the book of John chapter 8, there was a woman caught in the very act of adultery. I believe that this was a calculated trap set before Jesus to see how He would react and judge the woman. In the process of testing Jesus, the men labeled the woman as

an adulteress. I do not disagree with the assessment of her accusers, since she was caught in the very act, but shouldn't the man have been brought before Jesus as well.

There is one factor that we need to focus on though. How did Jesus react to the situation? He actually did several things that we can learn from. First: He took His eyes off of the situation. By taking His eyes off of the situation, He would not allow temptation enter into a place where God wanted to express His love. He also could not focus on her while she was in a fallen state. If He had maintained His focus on her, the enemy would have more opportunity to expose her nakedness and her sin. With this exposure, Satan would try to cloud the purpose of God's love that He wanted to share with the woman.

The second thing that Jesus did was to give the Holy Spirit time to minister within the situation. By doing this, Jesus did not allow personal emotion get in the way of God's purpose. Jesus bent down to write something into the dirt, which almost seems insignificant, because it is unknown what He wrote. I have heard many speculations about what Jesus wrote but I could imagine that He was writing, "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, mind and strength. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Whenever we are confronted, we must pray for wisdom but there are times when we get caught off guard; so then what? I have to refer to what Jesus did with the woman caught in adultery. We have to first remove our eyes from the apparent situation so we don't focus on the sin of the individual. By doing this, we have a greater chance to put our focus on the Lord. When we focus on Him, we allow Him the opportunity to pour His wisdom into our hearts, where His love should already reside. It also removes the opportunity for offense to take residence in the situation.

The second thing that we need to do is to put off our fleshly inclination to charge in toward victory. We must allow the Holy Spirit to be the first to land on the beach of this war. He can take a lot more enemy fire that we can. By allowing the Holy Spirit the first shot, we keep our emotional infantry in check and keep it from causing undue damage.

We can also take this time to remind ourselves of the great commandment as referenced above. When we remind ourselves about putting our love for God first and then loving others as ourselves, it may cause us to think of a time when we needed mercy when judgment was warranted.

The third thing that we need to do is remind the enemy that he has no place for victory in the life of the accused. Although he may be correct with his accusation, we can remind him that God's love covers a multitude of sins, 1 Peter 4:8. We also need to think that the situation could be a trap to see how we will react. I learned a long time ago that we can never go wrong by doing what is right. We do not need to let the situation dictate how we will react because there may be a time that the accusations are false and we don't need to be hurling stones of unrighteous judgment. By building upon the chief corner stone of God's righteousness, the holiness of God will protect us and draw the accused out of enemy fire.

The final thing that we need to do is engage the accused. It may be by offering ourselves as a sounding board or offering direction of where to get the proper guidance. As a note, if we are not called as a counselor, we need to be careful about offering advice. Good intentions but ill-advised counsel can create a lot of damage. In other words, know your own limitations. When things get beyond your level of experience and calling, know where they can go for help.

With that said, you can offer the necessary love needed to help encourage someone to not continue in their sin. By being a friend that remains non-judgmental, you will show them that there is a better way. That better way is the way of repentance and getting back on track with the righteousness of God. When we do these things, we will be better able to compel someone to move toward God and win them for the kingdom of God.

I have heard it said that religion is a crutch. I have also personally concluded that it really is a crutch. People walk on crutches because they cannot put their full weight on one of their legs or ankles. The same is true for us and our spiritual condition. We simply cannot walk, with an upright heart, without the assistance of the Holy Spirit. In essence, He is our crutch. He provides the necessary support needed to successfully get through every area of our lives.

This is so true, because spiritual astigmatism does not only affect how we see others, but how we see ourselves. I was in the seventh grade when I had to start wearing contact lenses. These new lenses helped to stabilize my worsening vision. While my natural eyes had been stabilized, my soul was still missing something.

I was a good kid, but still empty inside. By good, I mean that I wasn't apt do to what I thought were the wrong things. I didn't drink or smoke and I tried to treat others with respect. This frail goodness still had me deceived. When I was in the United States Marine Corps, my life came crashing down around me and I realized that I needed a Savior.

With all that I thought was good in my life, I realized that it was all empty if I was doing everything for myself. What I thought were my strengths, ended up being my weaknesses, because all my strengths were devoted to me.

When I finally saw that I was still missing something vital, something more real than I could have imagined, my life began to change. I turned my emptiness and brokenness over to Jesus, and He cleared my vision. He began to renew how I saw myself and ultimately, other people. It hasn't been an easy walk, but one that I can honestly say, has been well worth the trip.

As a person who wears corrective lenses, I can't fully function without them to correct my nearsightedness and astigmatism. The same holds true for our walk through life; without the Holy Spirit correcting our spiritual vision/astigmatism, we cannot fully function as believers. If we do not allow the Holy Spirit, to use the Word of God, to renew us into the image of God's Son, we will only stumble along through life and cause a lot of untold damage around us.

Without the Spirit of God to make our vision clear, we will never see others as He does. We will also never see ourselves as God does. We will ultimately think of ourselves more highly (or lowly) than we ought to think because we will not desire to correct ourselves while we are busy correcting others. Let's put on our Holy Spirit glasses or contacts and ask Him to guide us with His perfect vision.

Becoming An Island

Cast Away, *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*, three movies, all about people becoming stranded on a deserted island. There is a fascination with these types of stories because we immediately tie our emotions into the survival of the characters. We help them rejoice with a discovery that may help them and we become heart broken when things do not go their way. With every hope for rescue, we hope with them. And, with every disappointment, we cry with them.

For me though, I was always intrigued by *Swiss Family Robinson*. I don't really understand why; could it have been the way they built their tree house on the island, or the way they overcame the pirate attack. Whatever the case, the family was very resourceful and overcame a lot to survive the shipwreck and learned to dwell in isolation. There are a few thoughts that come to mind about the comparisons between these movies and real life isolation. In the movies, the individual or family had set off on a course of adventure, with high hopes of getting away from the routine of their lives. During the course of their trip, a storm rose up against them and left them battered, broken and shipwrecked on an island. I can see similarities in the life of an individual who has become isolated from others. They were going through life when a storm rose up, and left them battered, broken and shipwrecked.

In the events that surround individuals who have gone on shooting sprees, they have found a pattern of isolation. They have discovered that there have often been patterns of abuse or ridicule. In the eyes of the eventual shooter, the constant barrage of their storm causes them to find refuge in their own little world.

Isolation can actually be worse than the problems that some people face because it does not allow them to have a point of relief. In the times that I have isolated myself from others, I wallowed in the torment of being alone while not being willing to allow others to impart into my life. My insecurities came from a lack of confidence rather than any abuse, so I do not equate my struggles with those of anyone else. What I have found though is this, separating yourself is not the answer.

You may have heard the phrase, "No man is an island, entire of itself". It came from the English poet John Donne in his *Meditation XVII*. In the context of this text, Donne is relating his relationship with everyone as a means of brotherhood. He stated that with any man's death he is diminished. From his writing, I can surmise that he is saying that we all need each other. While I don't fully understand the logic of his time, I can understand the idea that I am a man in need of the personal interactions of others. The odd thing about this though, is the fact that I have tried to live a life of seclusion. I was a man without many friends, because of my lack of social interaction. I was driving my wife crazy with my sudden departures from the gatherings of family and friends. I did not know how to enjoy the company of others and so isolated myself from the people that I cared about. I was becoming an island.

As much as I longed to have real friends, I could not sustain any relationships because of my own insecurities. I needed acceptance and feared rejection. It was almost like walking on a two edged sword. One edge would cut because of my dependence on acceptance, as I struggled for self worth. The other edge would cut because fear crippled

my chances of meeting many wonderful people. Either way I turned, it seemed that I was going to lose.

The saddest thing about this loneliness, in which I dwelt, is the fact that I did not realize I was in a dark place. I was blind to the damage that I was causing to myself, my family and my friends. I did not understand that the people who were the closest to me had to bear the brunt of my loneliness.

I no longer make loneliness my habitation but wonder how this loneliness affected my growth as a believer in Christ. Did it hinder me from touching someone's life with the Gospel? Did it hinder someone else from imparting into my life? What kinds of connections or divine appointments did I miss because of my selfishness? If I was there in the physical, was I there, ready to either give from God or receive from His Spirit? I may never fully know what I missed out on but I do know that in a lot of cases, I was not ready to give an account for the joy that was in me. I didn't have much joy to give.

Before I made a commitment to serving Christ, I used to believe that people could just watch church on TV without being bothered to actually going to church. While this may be a safe way of playing church, it doesn't do much in building us as part of the body of Christ. When I began to make more of a commitment to Christ, I still remained much to myself, not caring if I interacted with anyone. As I look back on my own little island, I can see that there was not much difference between not attending church, and being there in my own little world. I never realized how much I needed what others had, or how much I had to offer to others.

If, while you are reading this, you feel like this is your story too, you may also be thinking, "What is the problem with being in your own little world"? Well, there isn't if you don't desire to grow in the Lord. There isn't if you don't desire any blessings from the Lord; the blessings that He sends through the love and kindness of others. There isn't if you don't want to be used by the Lord to be a blessing to others.

My friends, being an island is not the best that God has for us. He created us to desire fellowship and companionship. That is why He did not leave Adam in the garden by himself. Yet, there is so much more than the bond of fellowship that we miss out on by keeping ourselves separated from others.

When we make the decision to isolate ourselves from meaningful relationships, we also pull the plug on fulfilling our call from the Lord. In Mark chapter 12, Jesus was asked, "which is the first commandment?" He answered with this, "The first of all commandments is: The Lord our God, The Lord is one, And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind and all your strength". He then went on to say, "And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'".

In other words, loving God takes everything that is within you, and that can't be accomplished by living a life of isolation. And since loving our neighbors as ourselves is like loving God with everything that is within us, loving others has to be more than just a shallow experience. It is not to say that all relationships will be equal to that which you have with your spouse or your closest friends, but it still has to remain high on your daily agenda to develop.

What do I mean? Every day, we have to develop our relationship with God, our spouse, children and others. All of our relationships fall into one of two categories, loving God or loving our neighbor. There is only one God, so everyone else is our neighbor. We must then love them as ourselves. The math looks simple but sometimes the problem has

the appearance of difficult algebra. In some relationships, 2+2 ends up looking like $4[2(2x-58 \times 3)-35 +6]$. But regardless of how easy or hard the relationship is, the answer always equals “love your neighbor as yourself”.

Having right relationships is only one part of the call of God that we mess up by being isolated. Although, that is where everything begins, we do have other callings from the Lord. I will not get specific with regard to any particular calling, but if we try to live a life in exile, we will not last very long. For example, the Apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 12 about being part of a body. He said that each part of the body has a specific purpose that benefits the entire body. He also said that there had to be unity within the body for it to function as designed.

For example, if the eye decided that it did not want to be a part of the body and plucked itself out, how long do you think the eye could sustain life, a few seconds? The eye was designed with a specific purpose to edify the whole body. The same goes with us as believers. We each have a specific purpose and calling within the local body and the global body. We are needed and we cannot fulfill our calling as a member of the body if we remain plucked out.

We should have an understanding that we are all commanded to evangelize the world. Jesus said in Mark 16:15 for us to go into all the world and preach the gospel. This was not an exclusionary statement. He wasn't just speaking with the disciples in His presence; He was speaking to all of us.

When the Apostle Paul wrote, in his second letter to Timothy, he said to always be ready to give a reason for the hope that was in him. He also told him to do the work of evangelist. Again, these are not exclusionary statements. He was writing to Timothy but the Word of God is all inclusive to those who are believers in Christ. We are not all apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers, but we all have a testimony. We can share what God has done for us.

Becoming an island isn't just an individual problem within the body of Christ; it can also be a body of Christ problem. Sometimes I think that the local church can get into a rut of doing the same old, Sunday morning, Sunday evening and midweek services that we forget about the world outside. We just need to remember that there are people in need around us, and we are the ones that need to be available and reach out to them. We, the local body can't afford to become our own little island because it takes all of us to make the body of Christ live in this world.

Loneliness is a place that contains no solace for despair. God created us with the need for companionship; first with Him and second with others. He said in Genesis 2:18, *“It is not good for man to be alone; I will make him a help meet for him.”*

I don't believe that God created man's helper so man could leave his relationship with God. I believe that God's intent was for man and woman were to help each other in their relationship with the Lord. In other words, Eve was supposed to help Adam remain close to the Father, and Adam was supposed to help Eve in the same manner.

Hollywood has glamorized the idea of being a cast away, but God desires strong, intimate relationships. Without relationships, we will not bring our gifts into the family of God. Others are depending on us to be who God created us to be. When we become our own island, we hinder what God wants to do through us because we need to be mixed in with the call and anointing of others.

Loneliness is not a form of protection but a blockade for what God supplies. As we begin to open up the restrictions on the influence of others, we may feel the pain of past hurts, but God will also open up a fresh release of His Spirit into our lives. He will use others to impart into our lives, but not so we can hoard the blessings.

God imparts into us so we can impart into others. We can't be used to impart His blessings if we hide from the world. It is time to cast away our fears and our hurts, and break free from the bondage of loneliness. God has sent a rescue ship to your island, and His name is Jesus.

Compromise by Tolerance

When I was in my preteen years, my dad gave my brother and me some very sound advice about who we hung out with. For a little back ground, I grew up in a time when everything closed by 9:00 PM, we had no cell phones or cordless phones and I don't even think that we had cable television. I'm not quite ancient, but survived without such amenities.

There was one evening that my brother and I wanted to go out into the neighborhood after dark to hang out with some friends. We were not planning on doing anything but extend our day together so we thought our request was innocent and pure.

Our dad told us something that I still remember to this day. He said, "There is nothing you can do after dark but hang out and get into trouble. Everything is closed, so you have no business going out." We were disappointed but understood. We may not have fully understood his reasoning then but as we grew older, it became more clear to us that he was trying to protect us.

What my dad said to us that night was this, as I paraphrase the depth of his words, "If I let you go out after dark, you may be faced with a situation that you are not prepared to handle. You may be asked to compromise your own integrity to fit in with the crowd. I can't say whether or not that will happen, but I want to make sure that I don't allow you to fall into the temptations that may come your way. As you mature, you will have to make those decisions, but I want to give you a little advice before that day comes, 'there is nothing that you can do after dark but hang out and get into trouble'."

There was so much wisdom about integrity in one sentence. I know that I embellished a little on the paraphrase, but as I think on that sentence, I am reminded of the verse in Romans 12:2. It says, *And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.*

In today's society, it almost seems impossible to do anything without a little compromise along the way. We have all heard the phrase, "If you will scratch my back, I will scratch yours". It means that if you will make concessions so I can get what I want, I will make similar concessions so you can get what you want. Unfortunately, the attempt to make everyone happy can end up causing people to compromise their own standards.

When we allow someone to talk us in to this kind of deal, we are basically saying that what they have to offer is of equal or greater value than our standards. That may even be the case, but as a believer in Christ, nothing should cause us to compromise Biblical standards. We should stand firm under the shadow of the righteousness of Christ, for in Christ, there is freedom. Galatians 5:1 says, *"Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage"*.

I will not say that all compromise is bad. Deals are made every day in business, politics and in our personal lives, but we need to be mindful to never compromise our integrity. We also don't need to become a slave to, or be held hostage by any form of compromise. The Word of God has plenty to say about compromise, and its adverse affect on people. The first place of compromise was in the Garden of Eden, and there were several made in the course of one life changing event. When the serpent beguiled Eve, she compromised

her understanding of God's instruction about the tree in the midst of the garden. Rather than checking with Adam, her head, or God Himself, she became entangle in the deceit of Satan. One compromise of God's Word caused the spiritual death of everyone who would be born afterwards.

I can't stop with the compromise that Eve made, as it would not be fair to her. The second compromise came from Adam, when Eve offered the same forbidden fruit to him. He knew God's instruction, yet failed to rebuke her. Instead of closing the gap of compromise, he gave in to the lie; thus sealing the fate of mankind.

Through their disobedience, they allowed the lies of the serpent to take root in the foundation of God's truth. That is the thing about deception; it takes root in a bit of truth to give the appearance of being right, but no matter how deep its roots go, it will never be truth.

A similar compromise rose up, against the promises of God, when He promised that Abraham would be the father of many nations. We can see that the Lord's covenant with Abram began in Genesis chapter 12 verses one and two. It says, *"Now the LORD had said to Abram: Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. ²I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing"*.

There were three other times that God had confirmed His promise to Abram. There were also three times that Abram compromised his covenant with God. Twice when he said that Sarai was his sister, and once when he followed the voice of his wife and slept with Hagar.

In spite of Abram/Abraham, allowing his flesh to intervene into the promises of God, the Lord was faithful to His promises. God was so committed to this covenant with Abram, that He gave him part of His name. In Genesis, chapter 17, God told Abram that he would go by the name of Abraham and Sarai by the name of Sarah.

The compromises that Abraham made with the covenant of God only brought on confusion. While God was faithful to fulfill His covenant promises, the results of the confusion can still be felt today. God's covenant was between Himself and Abraham, and was to be fulfilled with his wife Sarah.

When Ishmael was born from Hagar, the covenant had not come to pass, as he was born out of sin and not promise. Isaac was the son of promise, and all of God's promises would be fulfilled through him. When we compromise the Word of God, we allow ourselves to become confused about the reality of God's truth.

As we walk with the Lord, we can usually look back on the times in our lives that emotional or spiritual heartache occurred, and see when we made bad decisions. We can pin point by the day and the hour when we allowed the flesh make a decision that should have been given to our spirit. That "ah-hah" moment when we would like to kick ourselves for being so stupid. Those moments, of a momentary lapse of judgment, are usually preceded by listening to ungodly counsel or no counsel at all.

We do need to seek counsel when faced with a difficult decision, but if that counsel is not led by the Spirit of God, we can easily be pulled in to the wrong direction. Psalm 1:1 says, *"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, or stands in the way of sinners, or sits in the seat of the scornful"*.

We have to be mindful of where we receive instruction because if we don't receive Holy Spirit led instruction, we will be led into trouble. Not being mindful of the Spirit and the Word of God can lead us to become confused about the truth of the Spirit and the Word. God is not the author of confusion, 1 Corinthians 14:33. Every command and promise of God will not contradict the Word of God. Everything that He says and does fulfills the promise of His Word. As the author and finisher of our faith, God's greatest desire is to establish and maintain a relationship with us.

Every story that we learned as a child, or through discipleship classes, is built around the firm foundation of God wanting a relationship with His created people. He has established guidelines for our perfection, and it is only when we take a step away from those guiding principles, that we walk from under the shadow of His protection. Our willingness to compromise God's commands inhibits our ability to walk in His favor.

With the purpose of relationship, between God and His children, He will always provide what will be in our best interest. One problem that we have with this scenario is our earthly fathers. Too many people do not have a good, earthly example of what a father is supposed to be for their children. We can only relate to God from an earthly perspective, so we maintain a closed heart to the love of God because we don't receive love from our earthly fathers.

But, no matter how good or bad our situations are, judging God from human experience and understanding is never a good idea. People will always fail our expectations, but instead of grasping this understanding, we tend to use these experiences to justify our relationship with God.

There are so many people who flounder in their walk with Christ because they get offended at church. Although God has placed within us, the ability to overcome anything in the name of Jesus, we still fall short of the glory of God. Our relationship with Christ should never be based on what others do, or don't do.

When we stop our relationship with the Father based on the actions of others, we are essentially compromising our own walk, yet we do this in judgment of the walk of others. This is only an excuse, and our own laziness will keep us from being able to overcome the offense and to walk in the anointing that God has placed in us.

Where do we stand with the covenant promises of God? God has never moved or waived from His promises. He has never compromised the integrity of the call that He has placed upon each one of us. He has also commanded us to maintain our assurance of His calling. In 2 Peter 1:10, Peter wrote, *Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble.*

Peter was bringing home the point that our walk with Christ is to be done with all diligence and steadfastness. If we begin to compromise, we lack the discipline to make our calling and election sure. Being a disciple of Christ has to begin as a life of discipline.

1 Corinthians 11:31 says, *For if we judge ourselves, we should not be judged.* We need to maintain our walk with judgment and integrity. Not to the point of walking in self condemnation, but of self preservation. In other words, in our walk with Christ, everything that we do must be done with the thought of how our actions reflect Christ and the Word of God.

We must take a moment to seek the Spirit of God to see if we are getting ready to reflect His light or the enemy's darkness. If we seek Him first, we will be less likely to err, and

receive condemnation. Galatians 5:16 says, *This I say then, walk in the Spirit, and you will not fulfill the lust of the flesh.* Being lead by the Spirit of God will keep us from walking in darkness.

There has been a movement going that is attempting to bring darkness into every corner of the globe. This movement has been playing on the heart strings of those who do not know the truth of God's Word, and those who don't understand the consequences of being easily swayed by popular (progressive) thinking. This movement is called tolerance. What tolerance does is get people to compromise Biblical standards for those standards that appear to be more liberating.

The pushers of tolerance try everything they can to persuade people into believing, that if they allow certain things or ideas to become the norm, then everyone will be free to do what they want, without the condemnation of others. God already allows us to *do our own thing*, but He has also revealed the negative results of living a life outside of His covering and blessing.

The tolerance movement is making an attempt to criminalize any thought or idea that does not accept the changes being made. In their attempt to force tolerance, on those who do not accept these changes, they themselves, are being intolerant of the Biblical beliefs that many people still maintain as truth. One could almost say that this tolerance movement has to come at the hands of intolerance.

The less that the church stands for what is right, the more that it buries itself in the deception of tolerance. There are several church denominations that have succumbed to the pressures of tolerance. This should not be happening. Every denomination should get back into real discipleship using the Word of God. The church, meaning the real Body of Christ, has to become embolden with God's Word and be lead by His Spirit, so that a person's salvation experience doesn't just become a moment in time, but a real, life changing movement.

Psalms 11:3 says, *If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?* This is a warning. If we allow the foundations of truth to crumble under the pressures of intolerance, what can the righteous people of God do? I do know that God will reveal His glory. He will make a mighty move that few will be able to stand.

This move will be enacted in a spotless bride; a people who are lead by His Spirit and not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ. Even if the foundations are destroyed, God will raise a people who will stand for His righteousness. There may be a time when we will have to make a choice of bowing our knee to an idol, or marching into a fire. Will we compromise or will we stand?

Integrity is often defined as this, "Doing what is right, even when no one else is looking". It is hard to stay pure in all things, especially when no one else is looking. However, it is also difficult for us to take a stand for the Lord when all eyes are upon us. As people wait to see what we will do or how we will act in any given situation, they could actually be waiting to see if we really love God.

I'm not so sure if they are waiting to watch us fall but if we will rise. There are people out there who are on the fence of faith, and are waiting to see if someone really loves God, and not afraid to show it. They are waiting to see if God is real by seeing if we are real with our faith.

If we are seen in a compromising situation, others may turn from God without waiting to see what we do to the end. As my dad gave advice to my brother and me, about not going

out after dark, his intent was to protect us from harm and bad judgment. God's Word gives us a lot of direction about staying pure before Him, but also pure before others. His Word is not meant to restrict us, as some count restriction, but to protect us from harm and bad judgment.

We can't afford to make compromises with our spiritual integrity because they limit how much we allow the Lord to work through us. The only thing that we need to compromise is our own will by submitting it to the purpose and will of God. Only then will we have complete freedom from the bondage of the flesh.

Search for Relevance

As I was growing up, I never really had a difficult time making friends. There were some kids around the neighborhood that I hung out with after school and during the summer. As I grew up though, things seemed to change a little bit. It may have been because of the cliques in school that started to develop. I never considered myself as the cliquish type, so I personally did not seem to fit in any particular group. I did have friends in general but that seemed to be the extent of things.

I participated in sports and a few clubs throughout middle and high school, but that never seemed to make much difference with my feeling of being a loner. It was as if, that as long as I was participating in track, for example, I would be in with others, but outside of track, I was not remembered. I didn't feel relevant in the lives of others. I wasn't popular, or so I believed that to be true.

As I grew up, I started to wonder if things would be different outside of high school. I had a couple of close friends during my time in the United States Marine Corps, but still never felt totally connected with anyone. The isolation that I felt was a little over bearing at times.

I often thought that if I just had a girl friend, everything would be better, but my trained loneliness hindered my relationships. I even thought that having a wife would solve all of my problems, and even though the Lord blessed me with an incredible wife, even she couldn't sustain what I needed the most; a relationship with the Lord. My wife does an incredible job of keeping me lifted up in the Lord and continues to encourage me every single day.

We cannot satisfy the needs of the spirit by trying to fulfill the needs of the flesh. It is my relationship with the Lord that sustains my relationship with my wife. It is my relationship with the Lord that sustains every relationship that I need in my life. Even though I still have battles with lack of relevance, I am learning to trust in the Lord, and in Him rests all purpose.

In this busy world, it is easy for one to get lost in the crowd. It is also easy for someone to feel unimportant or inadequate when they feel all alone. They may not believe that they have a voice that can influence the world around them. They struggle with their relevant place in society and wonder why they even exist.

There are others who believe that they are important and are not afraid to let the world know. They have the take charge kind of personality and believe that they have all of the answers. These people believe that, without them, the world around them would fall into utter chaos. They are usually a little arrogant, and prideful. They also believe that their own relevance makes the world go around.

We either struggle with believing we don't have any relevance or we believe the world revolves around us. There are dangers to dwelling on either side of this spectrum. It is important to understand that God is the creator of us all, and He truly measures the relevance in the heart of man.

Where we bind ourselves up is in not seeing ourselves as God had planned and created us to be. When we place ourselves at the center of our plans, rather than the plans of God, we undermine the vision of God and remove ourselves from the covering of God's

purpose. In either case, we don't truly understand that relevance does not come from the approval or disapproval of men.

Our relevance is only based on what God says in His Word about us. And, His approval of us is not based on what we do, but whether or not we have made Jesus the Lord of our lives. Until we get this understood, we base our lives on the works that we can perform for the approval of God and men. Wanting and needing personal relevance is dangerous and can put us in bondage to those from whom we are seeking approval.

Everyone desires to have their lives to be viewed as having importance. However, as mentioned above, we do not know where our importance is derived. There has been a big push to stop bullying in schools because of a large number of teen suicides have direct links to the child being picked on.

A child may act different or dress different, and the kids who view them as odd attempt to form opinions based on their appearance. As the number of sneers increase, the esteem of the child declines. The bullying can escalate to the point of a mental or emotional breakdown that causes those who are bullied, to snap.

Much of the time the person inflicts harm to themselves up to and including suicide. There are also the occasions that they turn their pain outward, and inflict harm to others. This has been evident in some of the school shootings across America over the past 10-15 years. The unfortunate thing for us is that we tend to need the affirmation of others to solidify our efforts.

As an example, wives need to know that their husbands love them, and husbands need to know that they are respected. Without this affirmation, our inward pain can build up to unhealthy levels. While affirmation and praises are very nice to receive, we really don't need them as much as we think.

In Luke 18, we see the extremes of how relevance plays in the heart of man. This is the story of the Publican and the Pharisee. When the Pharisee began to pray, he boasted of his goodness before God. He was basically telling God that he was of more relevance to Him than the Publican. His heart was full of pride and began to debase others based on his own goodness and works. This is the problem that we have because we base our relevance on the merits of others and not on the standards of God's Word.

When the publican began to pray, he turned toward God with a broken heart and believed that he had nothing important to offer Him, and only asked God to be merciful. Jesus did say that the Publican went home justified while the Pharisee did not. However, He never said that the Publican was more important than the Pharisee. Both men needed the mercy of God to be at work in their lives, but only one had accepted this at the time. Whether we have accepted God's mercy or not, God still has a desire to have that mercy flow through us, as an extension of His love.

If we ever get to the point of placing our relevance in the work of our hands, we will always fail. What we do in this world, and for the kingdom of God, is important, but they are never more important than how God views us as individuals. We have become fixated on what we do and how important those things make us feel.

If we can ever give this up, we will be tied less to the praise of man, or seek after the rewards of God. We will also be free to just work to bless others and the Lord. This almost sounds contradictory, but working for the reward of God is bondage because we never fully believe that we have done enough to please Him. Pleasing Him merely involves doing His will. It is never about works and always about faith.

We tend to look at the outward appearance of a man to judge our relevance in society. In many cultures, there is still a class system that keeps people in bondage to their heritage. Those in the lower classes keep getting beat down and are never allowed escape their label of being less relevant to society. Our relevance is not based on our status. While we put others on a pedestal, someone else is trying to do everything they can to tear them down. We must remember that everyone is important and holds a special place in the heart of God.

When we rely on the opinion of man, we place that opinion above the Word of God. We place their value of us over the intents of God's plan and purpose for our lives. The real danger of this is the fact that those, whose opinion we hold so dear, never died on the cross for anyone.

We have to remember that God created us with purpose. By being created with purpose, we have instilled within us, an inherent value placed upon us by the Lord. Just like any tool that someone may have in a tool box, each one was bought with a specific purpose in mind. Each tool may have multiple uses, but usually carry at least one specific use.

The same goes with each one of us. Our value, or relevance, has already been placed upon us by the Lord. He created us with a specific purpose. Romans 11:29 says, "*For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance*". Meaning this, the call that God has placed on each of our lives was on purpose. He put it there for a reason, and He made no mistake in doing so.

I don't know how many times that I have heard someone say that they were not worthy of what Jesus did on the cross. Their belief of unworthiness is based upon their level of personal relevance. That is a lie from the pits of hell. The value of something is based on the one who is paying the price. Anyone who makes a purchase has to decide if the object is worth the requested price. Once the decision is made, and the deal is completed, the object was found worthy by the one who made the purchase.

When Jesus died on the cross, He had to first make the decision if the price He was paying was worth what He was getting in return. I would say with all certainty that since He did, in fact, die on the cross, He found all of us worthy of the price. He counted us worthy and no one can say anything different on the matter; not even God. The authority of value was placed on the nailed scarred hands and feet of Jesus.

Don't let anyone make you believe that you are less worthy of salvation based on their opinion. What others say and do does not give them the authority to place or remove value upon you or from you. Your value in this world is solely based upon the opinions of the one who created you and the one who died for you.

Although we were all born in sin, we were also born with eternal value. We have the choice to either accept or reject that value given to us by God. But, if we choose to accept what He has given to us, He will add so much more than we could ever imagine or desire.

If I speak to you and tell you the value that you hold, I cannot speak of my own authority, because it would only be a bunch of words coming from my mouth. But, if I speak to you and tell you, from the Word of God, I am no longer telling you by my authority, but His authority.

In our search for relevance, we need to look to the Author and Finisher of our faith. We are not relevant to the Father based on anything that we can or cannot do for ourselves,

for others or for the kingdom of God. Our relevance is solely based on His love for us through the sacrifice of Jesus.

As I have grown as a person and in the Lord, my fight with the demon of relevance continues, but I am gaining a greater understanding about where I fit into this world. I have learned that we can't really go back home again, because life there has indeed moved on without you. It isn't that we will no longer be important in the lives of old friends, but they have made new lives for themselves. This is why our relevance has never been tied to the kinship with others but with the Lord.

He desires to be the one constant in our lives and that never changes. He will bring people into our lives and out of our lives; He will bring jobs into and out of our lives; and He will move us for His purpose and glory. As we move with Him, He remains constant while everything else changes. If we allow our relationship God and His purpose for our lives, to be the center of our relevance, we will be less likely to feel unimportant again. We will be able to rest in the certainty of His love and plans/purpose for us.

Pedigree of Man

When a person applies for a job, there are usually certain qualifications that need to be met before they are hired. The individual has to complete a resume', an application and eventually an interview. Sometimes, the person will struggle with how much information is too much or too little in any step of the hiring process. If the employer is impressed with what they see on the resume' or the application, the prospective employee can then be called in for an interview.

In an almost redundant fashion, the person being interviewed has to restate many of the things that are in the resume'. In every step of the process, the job hunter has to be able to sell him/her self, to land the best job available. It is difficult to comprehend why some, who seem more qualified, are passed over by another candidate.

I have had one experience of being the interviewer when a candidate literally failed the interview. He seemed scared and had some other intangible issues that did not make him a desirable candidate for employment. A few months later, I was supervising the night shift of a process shut down and this guy showed up for work with our contractor. I thought that this would be a good opportunity to see him work outside of the interview room. It was during this period that I learned more about this young man than he could have ever told me in an interview.

I found out that he was an extremely intelligent, capable and versatile young man. As soon as I had an opening in my regular crew, I pushed hard for the company to hire him. I later told him that he did not interview well but was impressed with his work. He was one of the best hires that I had made and would have missed out on him if I had just relied on the interview.

There are so many people out there who are kept from fulfilling their call because of the perception of their qualifications. It is not to say that looking at a person's qualifications is bad or unnecessary, but sometimes we need to let our "Gut Feelings" make the decision rather than a piece of paper.

My dad was a loan officer for a credit union. He would take the loan applications and review each one of them to see if the individuals should qualify for a loan. After reviewing the applications, he would conduct an interview with the applicants. On many of the applications that he approved and would forward to his boss, my dad placed a candle stick in the bottom left corner of the front page.

After seeing several of these candle sticks, the boss approached my dad to inquire of their meaning. He would tell my dad that these applicants did not qualify for the loan, and wondered why he had approved them. My dad simply said that he had a gut feeling. He further explained the meaning of the candlestick.

He said that during WWII, families would place a candle stick in their front window while their son was off to war. They were hoping for a safe return of their son, and when he would return, they would remove the candle stick. He said that he knew that the applicants did not qualify on paper, but honestly believed that the money would return. As farfetched as this sounded, my dad had the highest return rate of loans at that particular credit union. People remembered my dad because he always treated them with respect and dignity.

There is a saying that has been around for a long time and it goes like this; “God doesn’t call the qualified, He qualifies the called”. While I believe that this is true, I also believe that God does call the qualified. I will explain both points to clarify my meaning.

Moses was a man of great power and authority over Egypt. He had been trained to rule over many people, both civilians and in the military. While he was slow of speech, some believe that he stuttered; he was still highly educated. He was the man for the job when it came time for the Hebrews to leave Egypt. The only thing in the way of Moses fulfilling the call that God had placed upon him was that he was working in the call of the world. God brought him to the place that Moses needed to change his focus by stripping him of everything that he thought he knew, lived and believed.

Through many years of molding Moses into the man that could lead the Hebrews out of bondage, God first established order in the life of Moses. That order was God first, purpose second and self last. There is a specific purpose for this order; 1: By placing God first in our lives, we place ourselves under the covering of His covenant love for us. 2: The reason to place His purpose second is for the benefit of placing our will in the middle of His will. This includes many things; advancing His Kingdom; having a family, loving our neighbor as ourselves, walking in forgiveness, etc. 3: By the time that we get to ourselves, we get lost in the other two and we will take joy in the glory of God.

Our “self” will be seen as less significant because we will have so much joy by the fulfilling of the love of God and the working of our kingdom purpose. It is in this place that others see Christ before they see us.

Once the breaking down of Moses was accomplished, God put him back in the place where he was a great leader; except this time, he was seen as a slave. For many, including myself, this would have been a difficult situation, but Moses understood his purpose and was not enticed by the former things. Even though he had been away from his leadership post in Egypt for 40 years, he still understood the dynamics of leading such a large group of people. Instead of having the backing of the government of Egypt, Moses knew that he had the backing of God and successfully led the Hebrews out of captivity and on their way to freedom.

We don’t need to misunderstand what God sees as qualifications for His service. We kind of rest in the mindset that all qualifications for kingdom ministry involve pulpit ministry. This isn’t necessarily true. If there is a doctor who uses his professional skills to bring healing to those on the mission field, then that is kingdom ministry.

There have been a number occupational professionals who were first trained and then saved. They went through their specific training, and then, at some point in their lives, gave their hearts to Christ. After being saved, they then give their lives and their profession, to the work of the Lord.

I know a lawyer who, by his own testimony, never lost a case. He was a man of great power and influence. While preparing for a really big case the Lord began to deal with his soul. The Lord asked him several times, “How long will you be a liar?” This moment in his life changed him forever.

He is still a man of influence and power, but my friend now uses the skills and qualifications, that he gained as a lawyer, to study God’s Word and to make a case for people to give their hearts to the Lord. He was still a man that had to be broken from the

will and pride of his flesh. He still needed to have his focus realigned to line up with the kingdom focus of the Lord. But once his focus changed to advancing the Kingdom of God, he has since started several ministries in India. He now has a school, a couple of orphanages, and a training facility that employs many and trains them in the Word of God.

You may be thinking that the examples that I used don't make the point that God calls the qualified. You are right to think that God still had to make some adjustments in their lives in order for them to be completely ready for service. That is an absolutely true statement. However, we must consider what someone goes through during the interview process that I spoke of earlier.

If the applicant does not have a specific skill set or the right qualifications, they will not get the job. However, if they display certain competencies or have the right qualifications, they have a better chance of being hired. This does not mean that the new employee will necessarily meet all of the expectations of the specific job they were hired for.

When they are hired by the company, the new employee still has to go through a certain amount of training in order to be completely ready for service to the company. The same thing can apply when the Lord calls an individual for working to advance the His kingdom. In many cases, the first qualification that the Lord looks for is a willing heart. The Lord will still provide the necessary grooming to take the willing heart and turn it into a useful heart.

Try to look at it in this way; the Apostle Paul was the most qualified of any of the apostles before him. When Jesus handpicked His first disciples, He chose fishermen, tax collectors. These men were not well educated but still chosen by the Lord to help restore the Kingdom of God on earth. Paul, on the other hand, was a man named Saul, and he was a Pharisee of Pharisee's. He grew up studying the Word of God. He was probably a theologian and very knowledgeable of the law. As far as his knowledge of God, he was far above any of the disciples.

If Jesus could have picked anyone to help lead the charge for the kingdom, one would think that Saul should have been the guy. But, it just wasn't the right timing for Saul. God was already using His disciples to turn the world upside down, before Saul would meet his purpose on the road to Damascus. Although Saul was ready, in some aspect of his life, he still needed to grasp the purpose of grace within the law. He needed to get refocused toward God rather than toward his works.

There is another story about my dad that is quite humorous. In the late 1940's, early 1950's, my dad served in the United States Army. Also during that time, Indiana was a hot spot for good basketball players. Everyone wanted a kid from Indiana on their college basketball teams. During a pick-up game at the base gym in Germany, everyone knew that my dad was from Indiana, and he was one of the first guys picked to play. The others thought he must be good because he was from Indiana. All thoughts were positive until the game began.

It didn't take long for my dad's teammates to find out that he was not good at playing basketball. Hope of success quickly came crashing down because my dad could not fulfill their dream of winning the game. Although he was a product of a basketball hot bed, he had not taken the time to develop the necessary skills to be competitive in the game.

My point is two-fold; apparent pedigree does not automatically qualify us for service and we can't rest on the perceived talents/gifts that someone may or may not have. We don't need to get lost with a person's name or title and assume that they will be called to service. On the flip side of that thought, we can't rest on the appearance of lack in a person's name or title and believe that they are not called to serve either. In the church, we spend too much time chasing the name of a person, who has a big ministry, rather than chasing after God. Too many anointed people are being overlooked because they don't appear to fit the mold of someone who has any anointing.

There are also too many people who are concerned about their own title rather than the Lord that they are supposed to represent. If the anointing is real, proper introductions won't be necessary. I have seen and heard of too many ministers getting upset because they were not properly introduced as Apostle, Prophet, Minister or Pastor so and so. If it was really about having a title, Jesus would have claimed one.

The essence of His ministry was pointing people to the Father. The essence of our ministry today is to point people to the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Anything other than that is promoting ourselves and our qualifications. God will not compete with you. He will allow you to promote yourself and your qualifications, but watch you grow in your pride as well. Unfortunately, this kind of ministry will eventually fall.

What is the worthiness of qualifications? It is not the perception of man. Man can only judge a person's qualifications based on the outward appearance. Over time, we can get an idea of who a person is in Christ, but never fully see their heart. The heart of man is very deceitful and only God can rightly judge a man by his heart. We also look at the stature of a person and think that there is no way that they could fulfill a call of God, yet most of the time, these are the people who God uses to change the course of a nation.

We need to be very careful to never allow qualifications to interfere with the plan of God. When we walk in the freedom of God's choices, it eliminates our need to judge what He wants to do because of what we see. God is full of surprises and He may actually use you where you think you don't fit. Be prepared because He loves to stretch those who He has called.

As we read through the Bible, it is apparent that God does not fit into the mold of man's wisdom. He seemed to pick men and woman who were small, outcast, broken, rebellious and unlearned to advance His kingdom. His wisdom, in placing a call on the lives of His people, is beyond our comprehension. But somehow, we tend to think that we are not good enough to be used by the Lord. Why would we be any less than a person from the Bible? God did not choose them because they were perfect. He chose them because they were faithful.

We fall short of being faithful, but so did Peter, and look what God did through him. We are more than qualified to complete the mission of our calling. It is time for us to just say, "Here I am Lord, send me."

Religious Spirit

I have some friends who spent several years on the mission field in Peru. During one of their trips home, I remember a story they told of their experiences. They said it was easy to share the Gospel in Peru because, to those who lived in there, Jesus was just another path to God. In Peru, the people would just add a god to their many gods’.

Many of their religious buildings had many layers of religious symbols. Rather than picking just one god, they would add the symbol of the next form of deity that they believed in. So, the Christian faith was just another form of faith. The people of Peru were happy to hear about Jesus, but denied His power in their lives because He wasn’t treated any different than the other gods.

I saw a similar thing when I went to India with a group from church. If I remember correctly, our host said that there were over a million gods in India. Adding to the difficult task of revealing the true deity of Jesus, over their gods, were the restrictions of the state concerning evangelism. We were able to hold crusades and preach the Gospel but we could not offer an invitation to accept Christ into their hearts. Invitations were given for attendees of these services to meet with a pastor, on another day following the service.

There was one day when the ministry team went through a village to pray for people. Our host knew everyone in the village and would explain a little bit about each person, or family, as we approached the house. Every person, regardless of their faith in Hindu gods or in Christ, was eager to receive prayer though. One of the things that I learned from that trip was this, as simple as the Gospel is, it can be harder to break through the poorly laid foundations of belief than it is to break through total unbelief.

There is a misconception about the idea of religion that causes practically everyone to become confused, agitated, defensive and even rude. I confess that the topic of religion confuses me as well. I am not so sure that the struggle is actually the idea of religion or the application of religion that gets us tripped up.

There are hundreds of religions in the world with thousands of gods for us to pick from. It’s no wonder that we get lost in the maze of where and how to worship something that we believe is a higher deity than ourselves. I won’t claim to have all of the answers, but I will share from the source of all truth and wisdom, the Bible.

What is religion? The American Heritage dictionary defines religion as ¹“*the belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe*”. ²“*The life or condition of a person in a religious order*”; ³“*A set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader*”. Within the three definitions given, they vary as wide as the gap between the truth and lies that draw people into a life of faith.

I am not going to entertain the different religions in this chapter, but only deal with the reasons people may look to other religions other than a life in Christ. A life in Christ is not based on a religious worship of God. It is only based upon a relationship between God and man through Christ. As simple as this sounds, some followers of Christ have certainly done a good job of distorting the truth of the Gospel and turning it into a religious affair.

My definition of religion is this: Man's interpretation of what and who God should be. Man has done everything he can to distort the truth about God and either add in ways to worship Him or take out ways to worship Him. God has never changed, yet man has tried to contrive a million ways to get to His heart.

Idol worship has always been a problem, as man has created objects of worship thinking that these objects hold a particular power. Habakkuk 2:18, 19 says, *"What profit is the image, that its maker should carve it, the molded image, a teacher of lies, that the maker of its mold should trust in it, to make mute idols? ¹⁹Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all"*.

The problem we have, that leads us to form an idol to worship, is our impatient attitude toward God. Man has always been impatient with God and turned toward something that can capture our attention. In Exodus 32, the people of Israel asked Aaron to make gods that would go before them because Moses was delayed in coming down from the mountain.

Aaron, the high priest of God, did not put up much of a resistance to their pleading and began to fashion the golden calf. He chose to satisfy the people's impatience rather than to wait on God. Israel turned back to the gods of Egypt, worshipped them, and made certain sacrifices to these idols. It took Moses' intercession before the Lord, to spare the people.

As we read this, there isn't much difference with the idols of Israel and our idols today. We don't read the Bible; we don't pray; we don't seek His face; we don't worship; we get mad with the preacher because church was too long, the list could go on and on but the point is this, we are simply bored with God. But, we don't mind sitting for several hours in front of the TV, watching a movie or a sporting event.

We have placed idols in our lives that keep us from spending time with God. Many would argue this point, but any time that something takes a higher priority in our lives than God, it is an idol. We have made our faith in God a religion and not a relationship.

Jesus made it a point to confront the religious elite of His day. This was a group who made the command of God void in their own lives while holding everyone else in contempt of the Law of Moses. In Matthew chapter 23, Jesus made it clear that the Scribes and the Pharisee's were working contrary to what they had commanded from the law.

Beginning in verse 3, Jesus says, *"Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. ⁴For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. ⁵But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. ⁶They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues, ⁷greetings in the marketplaces, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi'"*.

Basically, Jesus was declaring that the people should follow the law, as told by the Scribes and Pharisees; however, they were not to follow after their works. He said that they lived a *do as I say and not as I do* attitude.

Later in the same chapter, Jesus was saying that they were as "white washed tombs" because they made sure that everyone saw enough that looked righteous, but were dead

on the inside. That is the thing about religion; it is empty if there is not a change of heart. I know that many people of different religions do have a change of heart from who they were before, but they are still empty because their faith is based on their works.

Only in the Christian faith are we called to do the works of the one in whom we believe, for His glory alone. We are never enticed by the Lord to seek our own glory. We are never asked to perform any work for the sake of gaining riches, fame, heaven, or anything else. We are only commanded to do all with the foundation of the love of God and others, without any thought of reward.

It is hard not getting caught up in the moment of ministry and be proud of what the Lord did through us. If we have a powerful service and the anointing has flowed, we sometimes get a little idea that we did well for the Lord. We need to be very careful with these thoughts because they can lead us away from our kingdom purpose.

There have been too many ministries, both large and small, fall because they did not keep a guard in the tower of the ministry. They did not keep temptation at bay because they thought they were too anointed to fall. They thought that they were immune to the attacks of the enemy.

There is absolutely no one who is immune to temptation or attack from the enemy. If we allow our pride to enter into what God was doing, God will politely step aside and watch us fall. It is not because He ever stopped loving us, but because of His love for us. He does not want us to ever be out of His presence and He never wants our ministries to become our religion.

If we are leading people to the Lord, then what is the big deal? The big deal is this; we are in ministry because of the grace and calling of God. There are some who get into ministry without being called, or for the wrong reasons. I have heard many stories of church pastors preaching their hearts out without being saved themselves. Something or someone will enter into their life and ministry and God will reveal His truth to their heart. We can be leading hundreds of people to the Lord, but it will still mean nothing if we are not in right standing with God. Our motives have to be for the glory of God alone.

The last thing that any of us wants to hear is, "Depart from me, I never knew you." This will be said to many who try to use their own works, even if they were for the kingdom, without our own saving knowledge of God. Matthew 7:21-23 says, *"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. ²²Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name? ²³And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!"*

It is not about what or how many works that we do, but that our works are based on our love and faith for the Lord. Works don't need to become a religious habit. They need to always be motivated by the pureness of which we were called to those works.

But I am not in ministry, how does this apply to me? I had a conversation with a young woman who lived with an elderly lady. She helped the older lady with her grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, and anything else that she needed. I said to her, "So, you are in ministry". At first she looked at me with a puzzled look on her face, so I explained to her how she was ministering to the older woman. I explained to her that God's Word says to take care of the widow. And, in following Isaiah 58, she was honoring the fast that God has chosen.

The young lady was releasing the heavy burdens, sacrificing her own will (at times), making sure that the woman was fed, helped her with her house, etc. Some would argue that the girl was not in ministry, but I believe that she is. She is ministering to the physical needs of the older woman, and as a believer in Christ, she also maintains a certain atmosphere within the house. When I finished my explanation, she said, "Thank you. I needed to hear that". The reason this was significant in her life was the fact she now realized that her efforts were following scripture and mattered.

Whether we like it or not, every believer, is in ministry. We may have a regular 9-5 job, but those who are lost are watching our faith in action. They are watching how we react to things. They are watching to see if we participate in the off color jokes. They are watching to see if we walk with integrity. They are watching to see how we treat others. They are watching to see if our work ethic is at a higher standard. You can name any aspect of our lives, and they are watching. They will know if we are serious about our faith in Christ or if we are just being religious.

We may not get much of an opportunity to witness, or share the gospel, but in times of need, we need to step up to the plate and swing at the pitch we are thrown. What I mean is this; when someone, who has watched us live out our faith has a problem, we need to be that person they go to. We need to make our walk with Christ so inviting that they will turn to us before they turn to someone without Christ in their heart.

1 Peter 3:15 says, *"But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear"*. People need the hope of Christ shown in their lives, but failed religion will not be sufficient power for the light that needs to shine. 2 Timothy 3:5 says it this way; *"having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away"*.

I had the opportunity to do such a thing when one of my former employees came to me after his cousin was killed in an accident. As his boss, I was limited in what I could say about Jesus, but he told me that he was not asking his boss, he was asking me. He said that he was giving me permission to share anything that was on my heart because he needed to hear the truth.

So with that permission, I began to share about God understanding his pain, and that the only way to get through this time was with the help of the Lord. I do know that I was not a perfect example of Christ, but I also believe that what he saw in me and what he heard from me, matched. He knew that I wasn't just a religious person, but had a real relationship with Christ.

These opportunities are everywhere, and most of the time we don't see them because we only have a religious experience without having a real relationship with Christ. I believe that people really do want the truth, but religious people are getting in the way. I have surely made my share of religious blunders.

I know that I have turned some people away from the cross of Christ. I won't say that these moments are ever okay, but we have to learn from these mistakes and move on. We have to take our relationship with the Lord more serious than anything else that we could do with our lives. It is a matter of life and death. It may not be our death, but it could be for someone else.

When dealing with religious issues, we have to see if what we are witnessing (observing) promotes the Word of God. Always judge the fruit of any tree (ministry) by the fruit that

it bears. Jesus taught about the false prophets and teachers who would come to distort His truth.

Matthew 7:15-20 says, *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. **16**You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? **17**Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. **18**A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. **19**Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. **20**Therefore by their fruits you will know them.”*

We need to keep ourselves in check, so we do not fall into the trap of becoming religious rather than maintaining a relationship with God. We also need to intently observe the work of others. We do not need to become skeptical of all that they do, but always be mindful of their fruit. People are going to make mistakes and I have made enough of my own to know this, but there is a difference between a mistake and a life style of pride, arrogance and self promotion.

Let us not grow weary in doing well for the Lord, Galatians 6:9. Our work for the kingdom of God will deliver its reward of the hope that we long for. Our relationship must stand on the basis of His love for us and our willingness to serve Him with all of our hearts. A willing heart prepares the body for service while a selfish heart prepares the body for failure.

Religion is not the enemy of God, but the unrepentant, selfish heart of man is. Pure religion is what God desires. Pure religion brings all glory to God, no matter what. It exhorts others to greatness in Him, without any thought of competition. It looks out for the needs of those who cannot fight on their own. It causes us to deny ourselves, when called upon, to advance someone else.

Pure religion promotes the kingdom of God, while religion exalts itself above God and everyone else. Religion, outside of the command of God, is not based on love, but hate, manipulation and greed. It destroys the value of others. And, it draws people away from the kingdom of God.

As we walk out our faith in Christ, others will be witness to the truth. This happened during the ministry of Jesus. Jesus revealed the reality of the Father by exposing the real needs within the heart of man. He showed, by example, how we were created to live. He never condemned to law but what man had caused the law to become. By that I mean, the law had become a whipping post instead of a guide to the truth of God.

Man had created so many loop holes to make the law fit into their own image. This image did not truly reflect the desires of God or the needs of the people. This image caused man to become a slave of man rather than a bond servant of the Father.

As we try to contain God into the image of how we think or feel He needs to fit into our lives, we only limit ourselves from the purity of the relationship in which He desires for us to dwell. God's holiness cannot be contained or limited but we can restrict Him for fully functioning in our lives.

If our lives reflect a man made religious experience rather than a righteous relationship with the Father, we will never reveal the good pleasure of God's love for us. Others will never see the reality of His good pleasure working in our lives. So in that, we not only inhibit the freedom of God in our lives, but in the lives of other people. God expects us to

share our relationship with others so they can taste that He is good. We can't do that if we add in our own religious ingredients.

Complacency is a Lack

During World War II, the United States did everything that it could to stay out of the fight. Germany was running amuck in Europe while Japan was terrorizing the Pacific islands. It seemed that there was territory that they each wanted to claim for themselves. Little did we realize, our position made us complacent. As some would say; “We didn’t have a dog in the fight, so why get involved?” Our complacency had caused us to be lulled to sleep and left us vulnerable to a surprise attack.

Although our military is diligent to stay ready for any battle, we were not necessarily watching the war with the anticipation of being needed. America had kind of lost its identity. Although we have never looked for a fight, we didn’t mind stepping in to help someone else who was outmatched in a fight.

The identity that I am talking about is the idea that America was the symbol of freedom in the world, but part of the roll we should have played, as this beacon of hope, was to help others remain free. America was a nation of purpose but lost its identity during our period of isolation.

On December 7th, 1941, America had its alarm clock go off. It was time for the United States to wake up and understand what was at stake for the nation and the world. We had to understand that this wasn’t just somebody else’s fight. It was on this day that America was officially invited to the war. Japan, for some reason, decided to ring the bell of America and call us to be united in our identity. I am quite certain that this was not their intent, but they sure did a good job of waking us up.

It was at this moment that America realized complacency is like sticking your head in a noose and waiting for someone else to kick the chair out from under your feet. After America accepted the invitation, Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto realized his tactical mistake and reportedly said, "I fear all we have done is to awaken a sleeping giant and fill him with a terrible resolve."

There is nothing like the feeling of having it made. I mean, when we seem to have everything going our way, and without any opposition. You know, when we think or even say the phrase, “It doesn’t get any better than this”. We don’t have a care in the world because we are hitting on all cylinders.

This can happen in any facet of our lives; work, play, our marriages, in school or even our spiritual lives. No matter when or where we have this feeling; it is the most dangerous time in our lives. We begin to think that we are invincible, and we can do just fine on our own; without any guidance from a mentor, a coach, a spouse, a pastor and especially the Lord.

All I can say is this: BEWARE! Beware of the fall that will soon take place. Beware of the humility that will be hiding around the corner, waiting to slap someone down. The day we become complacent in any portion of our lives can be the beginning of our destruction. It is in the state of complacency when we let our guard down and we get hit with something devastating. It is not fun to find yourself in that place, where we went from being on top of the world, to being made low.

Why do we get complacent anyway? Why do we ever leave behind, the lessons of our last fall from pride? I am not sure why but it has happened to every human that has ever

walked the earth. Every man and woman has lived the lie of being self sufficient and self preserving.

Everyone has struggled with living in a state of existence rather than living a life of purpose. We just kind of go through the motions without any thought of getting better, grabbing the bull by the horns, and living life to our fullest potential. Whether we have ever reached the top of our potential or not, we have all, just floated through life.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 says, *“But of the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I write to you. ²For yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. ³For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction comes upon them, as travail upon a woman with child; and they shall not escape. ⁴But you, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief. ⁵You are all children of light, and the children of the day: we are not of the night, nor of the darkness. ⁶Therefore, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober.”*

Although we are called children of the light, we are also warned about becoming overcome by the same peace and safety of those who are in darkness. As children of the light, we must make ourselves visible, with all diligence, so the world can see Jesus. Ephesians 5:16 (KJV) says, *“Redeeming the time, because the days are evil”*.

In the (ESV) it says, *“Making the best use of the time, because the days are evil”*. I don't think that any believer can honestly say that they have made the best use of our time in this world. We have all fallen short of our glorious call for the Lord. It is not time for condemnation but for recommitment.

Complacency has been the Achilles heel of the church. As believers in Christ, if we do not focus on preparing for any battle, we are preparing to lose every battle. We have to stop the idea that God will take care of us as we live our lives without any thought of maturing as a Christian. We cannot walk around with spiritual blinders on, thinking that we don't have anything to do for ourselves. The popular idea that God does helps those who help themselves is not true; however, He does work with those who walk by faith.

What is the difference? 2 Timothy 2:15 says, *“Study to show yourself approved unto God, a workman that doesn't need to be ashamed and rightly dividing the Word of truth”*. We shouldn't study the Word of God so we can know what the words say, but for the times in our lives that we actually need to use the Word in battle.

The Word of God is a weapon of warfare for the body of Christ to use just as an infantryman uses his rifle. He becomes intimate with his rifle and takes great care to keep it, so when he does need to fire his weapon, it will protect him.

Our walk with the Lord is meant to be one of continual growth. However, our growth depends on how well we listen to the voice of the Lord. Complacency causes us to grow weary of God's voice and then listen to the voice of the world. The amount of worldly influence that we allow into our lives will dictate how well we reveal the love of Christ back to the world.

The more the world is allowed into our lives, the less godly influence we will have with others. If others can't see Christ in us because we are living a worldly lifestyle, we will not be able to convince them that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world.

2 Peter 1:10 says, *“...give diligence to make your calling and election sure...”* We should be doing everything we can to abstain from the lust of this world by filling our

hearts with more of God. We can't just simply abstain from the world without filling ourselves with the Lord first.

Most people believe the statement, "Resist the devil and he will flee", as if, by their resistance, the devil cowers in fear. It doesn't work like that. The entire verse, James 4:7 say, "*Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee*". Our submission to God is an act of our will to do things His way. The devil flees from the presence of those who are filled with the presence of God.

Every part of our spiritual growth requires struggle, because without struggle, our flesh will not die. Our flesh is representative of our old, selfish nature. Everyone, who has been written about in the Bible, has faced their fair share of challenges. They were challenged in their faith. They were challenged with what they understood about the natural world and the infusion of the things of the Spirit of God.

Not a single person has escaped hardship and the only reason they survived was by their steadfastness to walk with God. None of them became complacent and decided that faith in God was not worth it. Even if they struggled with their circumstances, they came out ahead because they developed a measure of maturity in the Lord.

This maturity would not have happened if they did not go through the trial. As they maintained their faith in God, they were able to look back at the entire growth process and realize that God was there the whole time.

There are many times in our own lives that we can say the same thing. During the times when we have felt alone and out of the reach of the hand of God, is when God was preparing us for something really great. Although those struggles really seemed too much to bear, somehow we made it through. Then, as we looked back, to reflect on that time, we could not only see the hand of God, but also the growth that we made during that period.

I remember, during the first of our three pregnancies, my wife and I believed that we heard the voice of God to have children. Everything seemed to be going well until the four and one half month mark. For the next month, the pregnancy took a turn that we did not expect and we ended up losing a set of twin girls.

Many would say that we must not have heard God correctly, but we believe that we did. What took place during that time was very difficult to get through, but we also felt the presence of God in the hospital room. What the Lord has done, for us and through us, would have never happened if we had not gone through this trial but more importantly, remained faithful to Him.

This event was one of many, during our married life, that God has used to shape us into the servants that we have become. (We still have a long way to go to being who He really wants us to be though) Some of our trials were self inflicted and some were actual tests. Regardless of the source of our trials, our faithfulness to the Lord is paramount. If we place ourselves in the bad situations that cause problems, the answer is to turn to the Lord with complete trust that He has always remained faithful to us.

Self inflicted wounds are no excuse for turning away from God or becoming apathetic toward service to Him. The enemy will want you to believe that you are a failure and that everyone is talking bad about you. But, even if they are, the voice of God is always speaking to woo you toward His presence. A complacent heart will not be able to withstand the fiery darts and trials that it faces. Our hearts have to always be prepared to fight the good fight of faith, as spoken of in 1 Timothy 6:12.

One of the easiest things we can do is give up. Quitting is so easy, but all too often, we do not realize the consequences we will face. Yes, there are times that we have to quit fighting, but most of the time, that means to just stop wrestling and allow God to handle the matter. There are so many times that we think we can make it through the struggle on our own when we actually need to hand it over to the Lord. But, the type of quitting that I am discussing, is just quitting all together. It is when we say that nothing is worth the trouble, so we quit a tough job, church, fellowship with other believers, etc. My friends, anything worth having is worth the effort.

Matthew 11:12 says, "*The kingdom suffers violence and the violent take by force.*" I have heard this ministered a couple of different ways. One way is that the enemy is violent and takes ground by force, and the other way has the tables turned, where the kingdom of heaven takes by force. Either way you look at it, there is violence taking place, in the heavenly realm surrounding us, and having a heart of spiritual complacency will keep us unprepared for battle.

I heard a friend preach one time and the title of his message was something like this, "*It is Time to Get as Mad as Hell*". In other words, the forces of hell are mad and they will do anything to destroy every one of us. That is believers and non-believers. Hell's fury does not care who it destroys, it just looks for any victim it can overcome.

We, as believers, need to be as mad as our enemy and begin to take ground. It is not good enough for us to just hold our own ground. We must, as we are called, take ground to advance the kingdom of God. We are in a war of survival. God has called us to have abundant life and we can't live abundantly if we are always turning a blind eye toward the battle.

There is one thing that every believer needs to have if we are going to live victoriously. We need discernment. We need the discernment of knowing when and how to fight. There will be times that God will call us to look like the fool and appear to lose, but this apparent display of weakness can be an overpowering display of strength in the right circumstances.

Under certain conditions, humility reveals a greater strength than overt spiritual aggression. In other words, it may be better to say nothing in self defense than to clamber on and on about how you were wronged.

In the end, if we allow God to be the judge, true justice will bring a greater victory. Jesus displayed this for us prior to going to the cross. He said nothing in His defense, went to the cross and His grave, and then displayed the greatest victory man has ever known, at His resurrection.

God will also call us to be like a mighty warrior and fight with everything we have. One way we can fight, as a mighty warrior, is through intercessory prayer. It is done behind the scenes in the natural, but in the spiritual realm. It is hand to hand combat.

Another way is like when Jesus cleansed the temple in Matthew 21:12, 13. Jesus boldly called out the corruption that had entered into the temple. Jesus showed us that we have an important job of keeping the house of God clean from the world. It will take a great deal of wisdom to understand when each is required, but when we begin to figure this out, our battles will end with more victory than defeat.

One of the greatest tools of Satan is to lull us to sleep. As long as we believe that everything is going well, Satan knows that we will let our guard down while he is planning the next attack against us. We are to always be ready for the battle, especially

when we don't see the enemy working against us. You can kind of look at it this way; a person in a pool has to always work to stay afloat. If they ever stop working, they will drown. It is not a matter of if, but when. This is true very every believer in Christ, there is no rest against to enemy.

Conclusion

In 1970, a song came out on the radio that was a huge hit. It was sung by Lynn Anderson and went to the top of the charts for about 5 weeks. The song titled, *Rose Garden*, would probably be best known as *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. As the song implies, life won't always have fairy tale endings and sunshine, but is sometimes filled with hardship and rejection. Life never promises that everything will go our way. We have no promise of prosperity. We have no promise of good health. And we have no promise for tomorrow. Life isn't always a rose garden because the heart of man makes some very wrong decisions.

The thing that amazes me about the song, *Rose Garden*, is the fact that man started off in a garden. Within that garden Adam and Eve had everything they needed. It was also a place where they were able to fellowship with God. Think about that for a minute; Adam and Eve walked with God. They got to see the face of God because they were without sin. One can only imagine how their conversations may have gone, but it seems to me that the details wouldn't matter because being in the physical presence of God would be enough. But for Adam and Eve, God's presence was not enough.

Even though the Garden of Eden was complete, for the benefit of Adam and Eve, it still was not enough. There was something that, through the serpent's distortion of God's Word, they thought they needed. They were led to believe that God's provision was not enough, and with that, sin entered in to their hearts. Enough is never enough once we figure out that we don't have everything. We can see this truth throughout the Word of God and in life today.

Once sin entered into the heart of man, we lost the ability to be content. Once Adam and Eve lost the true sight of the beauty and provision surrounding them, they started living a life of confinement. Man became confined with garments to cover their nakedness. Man became confined by having to work the ground for their food. Man became confined by laws. Man had to build places to dwell. And, we had to build a place to worship God. This tabernacle was not for God but for us. Sin has caused us to be confined in the true worship of God.

Between the time of Adam and Eve dwelling in the garden, and the Hebrews dwelling in the wilderness, the heart of man became wretched and consumed with sin. Because of this, God instituted a set of boundaries for man to remain clean before Him. Within this structure of law was the mandate for a place of worship called the tabernacle. The tabernacle was a place for man to worship God and make atoning sacrifices for their sins. It was the first man made structure that held a place for the presence of God to be seated.

Although this tabernacle was designed by God, its structure and reason for existence was not because of the limitations of God, but the limitations within the heart of man. It further demonstrated the need for redemption of the spirit of man with God.

From the time of Moses to the presence of Jesus, man found many ways to profane the law of God. Rather than follow the law as written, the lust of men lured them to abuse the law for their own gain. The rituals of the tabernacle became diluted by the doctrines of men. It was probably difficult enough for people to follow the law, but when men added their own wisdom to the law of God, it trapped people into the acts of works rather than the worship of God.

Man's wisdom today does everything it can to push God to the side. We want to place Him within the confines of what makes us feel good. If His rules are too restricting, we just get rid of those rules. We believe that God can't really be a loving God if we can't get or do anything we want. We desire to be free to do anything that makes us feel good, but don't want the consequences of sin. But ultimately, our restrictions of God do not restrict Him at all. They only further restrict the freedom with which we were created to have.

The heart of God was to give man a freedom to worship Him without the confines of anything made with the hands of men. John 4:23, 24 says, *"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. 24"God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."* Man was designed to dwell with God without any barriers, but sin brought a gap of separation between our spirit and His heart.

But, rather than dwell in a place to freely worship God, we dwell in a place of bitterness if we don't get our way. We follow after our own traditions because we believe God requires too much from us. We long to hear other men praise us, than to hear the voice of God tell us that His love for us is greater than anything our hearts could imagine. We allow our vision of others be clouded with prejudice and fear, instead of asking God to reveal His purpose in our lives.

There are so many things that we do to bind ourselves to the lies of Satan. The promise that the serpent made to Adam and Eve is still causing a vacuum within the heart of man. We still try to fulfill that thirst with deception. Jesus told the woman at the well that whoever drank from the well of living water would never thirst again. We should always thirst for more of God, so what does this mean?

If we will get real and take a drink from the fountain of life, the river of living water, we will never thirst after those things that draw us from the presence of God. Jesus was explaining that her lusts kept her from fulfilling the desires in her spirit. Once His Spirit tapped into hers, she began to realize what she had been missing. All that she looked for in men was fulfilled within the presence of God. She was finally free from the bondage of her lust that kept her from dwelling free before God.

The more we try to rationalize how God wants us to worship Him, the more we are bound in our worship of Him. We were not meant to dwell in a box but in a garden built by the creator of all things. There is really only one place where God desires to dwell. Psalm 22:3 says, *"But You are holy, Enthroned in the praises of Israel."* This verse is most often quoted like this; *"God inhabits the praises of His people."* When Jesus went to trial, His accusers quoted Him as saying that He would destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days. What Jesus did was to destroy the temple of man, opened the veil to the Holy of Holies and gave the heart of man the freedom the worship God as originally intended. Jesus restored the temple of the heart of man as a place to true worship of God.

If you feel like you are still in bondage to something that is keeping you from really opening up to the things of God, and you don't know how to be free, the solution is not turning from Him but running toward Him. God desires to have a free flowing relationship with us, but we won't flow freely if our hearts are tied up with the things that so easily hold us captive. Our freedom came at a cost, the death of Christ, but if we want

to life free in Him, it will also come at a great cost. The price for us is to deny those things in our lives that feed our lusts and submit to the will of God.

As we begin to break free of those things that bind us in our relationship with God, He will begin to reveal how we ought to live. As our lives begin to reflect this change, others will begin to take notice because they will start seeing an outward result of what God is doing on the inside. The end result will be a people that truly worship Him in spirit and truth.