

Set Aside a Sum of Money

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. - 1 Corinthians 16:1-2

Brother Paul gave some practical guidelines for the church at Corinth when it came to giving. The people of God in Jerusalem were in need and Paul was exhorting the Corinthians to give financially to meet the need. Even though this particular giving that Paul was encouraging them to do was over and above the support that was to be accorded the preachers among them (see 1 Corinthians 9:14), these guidelines are appropriate for all giving in the church.

He begins by saying that they should give systematically. *On the first day of every week*, the day when the saints gathered, the people were to make a regular practice of giving. Not just every now and then, but every week. Regularly and systematically is the way to give.

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Next he says that every person should be involved in the giving. *Each one* is responsible for doing their part so that the need would be met. The goal was (and is) that everyone, rich or poor, young or old will be participants in the grace of giving.

Then Paul says that each should *set aside* the amount they will give. The biblical principle is to take the first fruits of what they had received from God and return it as an act of gratitude and blessing. Giving in the New Testament church is not obligatory but Paul's recommendation is that money be "set aside" for the Lord's purposes.

Finally, the giving was to be done by each one *in keeping with his income*. Those who sow generously will reap generously (see 2 Corinthians 9:6) and those who reap generously have a responsibility to continue to sow generously. If God has allowed you to be blessed, there is a corresponding responsibility to be a faithful steward of that blessing. We are blessed in order to bless. Blessing gives birth to blessing and generosity gives birth to generosity. When Paul says that we should give in keeping with our income he is not necessarily saying that if you don't have much that you don't have to give. Even the poor widow was able to be generous (see Luke 21:1-4). Generosity is relative to one's income and we are all to be generous.

Paul's advice to the Corinthian church can and should be taken as part of the pattern for giving under the New Covenant.

But This Happened That We Might Not Rely On Ourselves

We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. -2 Corinthians 1:8-9

One of God's highest priorities for our lives is that we learn complete and utter dependence on him. What this often means is that he allows circumstances in our lives that take us beyond our ability to endure so that we *might not rely on ourselves but on God.*

Paul was upfront with the Corinthians about what he and his companions endured while he was in Corinth and in some of the other cities in what was then known as the province of Asia. He said, *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered... We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life. Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death."* Later in his letter he goes into some detail about the extent of these hardships: *"Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked..."* (11:24-25). So, you can imagine that he was not exaggerating in the least when he said that the pressure they faced was *"far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life."*

How did Paul understand the reason for this suffering? It was simple. *"This happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God..."* When you have to go through what Paul went through, what positive option is there other than to rely on God? Who can rely on the arm of the flesh or the strength of their own soul under such intense pressure? It was beyond their ability to endure—they had to either rely on God or give in to the despair. And so, through their trials they came to experience *the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles* (vs 3-4) who is the *God who raises the dead* (v9). Paul's testimony is, *"He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us"* (v10).

It may not make sense to you that God would allow trials that are beyond your ability to endure that you despair even of life. It didn't make much sense that Jesus would send his disciples out *like lambs among wolves* (Lk 10:3). But he did. Why? So that they would not rely on themselves but on God. If you are facing pressure in your life that is beyond your ability to endure, could it be that the Lord wants to bring you to a place devoid of self-reliance with complete trust in him?

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It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that... -Ephesians 4:11-12

It makes no sense whatsoever that the church—as some have argued—would no longer be in need of apostles. Any honest look at Ephesians 4:7-16 will give you half a dozen reasons why apostles are for today.

First, it was when Jesus, *ascended on high* that he *gave gifts to men* (v8). The "gifts" that Paul speaks of here are the apostle, the prophet, the evangelist, the pastor and the teacher. If there were no other apostles than the original twelve then Jesus did not give these gifts when he ascended on high because those apostles were already here.

Second, if you leave out the apostle and the prophet, as many evangelicals are apt to do, you have left out two-fifths of the ministry offices that Jesus gave to the church. Not only that, you have left out the two most prominent and influential of the five.

Third, if apostles were needed then, why are they are not needed today?

Fourth, if the evangelist, the pastor and the teacher are still needed today *to prepare God's people for works of service* (and they are) then the apostle and the prophet must be as well because the five are listed together.

Fifth, have we all reached *unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God* (v13)? Have we *become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ* (v13)? Have we *grown up into him who is the Head, that is Christ* (v15)? That's why the "fivefold ministry gifts" were given to the church. Until we arrive, we need all five.

Sixth, if when Jesus gave "some" to be apostles he only gave twelve, then why are a number of post-ascension apostles named in the New Testament: Matthias (Ac 1:26), Barnabas (Ac 14:4,14), James, the brother of Jesus (Ac 15:13; 1 Co 15:7, Gal 1:19), Andronicus and Junias (Ro 16:7) and Silas and Timothy (1Th 1:1, 2:6).

The main argument that I have heard against the need for apostles today is the fact that we now have the New Testament Scriptures and therefore don't need apostolic ministry. If Ephesians 4 had said, "It was he who gave some to be apostles to write the cannon of the New Testament," then I could accept that argument. That not being the case, it is clearly evident that apostolic ministry is still needed, perhaps more than ever.

***Until we arrive,
we need all five***

He allows circumstances in our lives that take us beyond our ability to endure so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery. -Ephesians 3:7-9

Ask Christians to define “grace,” and the most common definition you get will be “God’s unmerited favor.” Close, but no cigar. Perhaps “mercy” can be defined that way, but as James Ryle says, “Grace is not ‘God’s unmerited favor,’ it is God’s empowering presence enabling me to be all that I was created to be and to do all that God called me to do.” Ryle points out that if grace is defined as unmerited favor, why does the Scripture say about Jesus that *the grace of God was upon him* (Lk 2:40) and that *he was full of grace and truth* (Jn 1:14). Was the grace on Jesus’ life, “unmerited favor?” Hardly. Though the Greek word “Charis” can mean favor and though there is definitely an element of God’s grace having to do with his free and sovereign gift, Ryle’s definition of grace as God’s enabling power hits the mark most of the 155 times the Greek equivalent is used in the New Testament. For example, it says of the early church: *With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all* (Ac 4:33). And it says that Stephen was *a man full of grace and power* (Ac 6:8).

As Paul speaks to the Ephesians about the grace of God in his life, you see this same definition applied to what he says. *The gift of God’s grace was given to Paul through the working of his power.* Grace comes through God’s enabling presence—*through the working of his power.* And what was the grace that Paul was given? *To preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery.* This grace was the ability for Paul to do what God had called him to do. “Charismata” are spiritual gifts that enable us to do the things he has called us to do

The purpose of God’s grace is to enable us to be all he has called us to be and to do what he has called us to do. We cannot do it without his empowering presence in our lives. How can we make it through the rough times? By the grace of God. How are we going to successfully raise our children? By the grace of God. How are we going to be saved? By the grace of God. Yes, grace is a gift and is often unmerited but, in essence, it is the ability that God gives for his will to be done in our lives.

Ephesians 4:7-16

August 31

It Was He Who Gave Some to Be Apostles

Our Conscience Testifies

Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. -2 Corinthians 1:12

The following are notes that I took during a discussion at a church Bible study I was leading. We were looking at this passage of Scripture in which Paul speaks of his and Timothy’s conscience.

-The conscience is a natural instinct given to all by God as an internal mechanism of the soul to distinguish between wrong and right (see Romans 2:14-15).

-Consciences are developed according to upbringing and experience. Satan works to distort our consciences by making them: 1) Overactive, robbing us of freedom to enjoy life and bringing undo condemnation, or 2) Under active, leading us into sin and rebellion resulting in a corrupt or even "seared" conscience (see Titus 1:15; 1 Timothy 4:2).

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-Paul always strove to have a clear conscience before God and men (see 2 Corinthians 4:2).

-Some classify the conscience as part of one’s spirit, others as part of the soul. In either case, it is not the same as Holy Spirit conviction. The Holy Spirit will bring the mind of Christ to us through our spirit so that by the renewing of our mind, our consciences will come more into harmony with true Holy Spirit conviction (see John 16:8; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 2:16). Holy Spirit conviction is pure; the conscience, however, can become tainted by internal and external influences.

-We should never violate our conscience (or tempt anyone else to do so) even if we think our conscience might be overactive. If we think it is sin, then to us it is sin (see Romans 14:23).

-The one who has freedom to do something should not look down on the one whose conscience won’t allow them to do that thing. Conversely, the one who does not have the freedom to do something should not condemn the one whose conscience does (see Romans 7; 1 Corinthians 8; 1 Corinthians 10).

-A clear conscience is good, but that does not guarantee that you are innocent. Only God is the final judge (see 1 Corinthians 4:4).

-Once you violate your conscience it is easier to do it the next time.

2 Corinthians 1:23-3:6

August 4

And Who Is Equal To Such A Task?

Thanks be to God, who...through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him... And who is equal to such a task? ...Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... -2 Corinthians 2:14, 16; 3:5-6

Throughout what we know as Paul's second letter to the Corinthians he speaks of his calling as an apostle. In referring to himself, Silas and Timothy he says, "*Thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?*" (2:14-16). As Paul is reflecting on God's call to spread the knowledge of Christ in the world he rhetorically asks, "*Who is equal to such a task?*" The answer, of course, is no one.

If evangelism was merely a matter of telling someone about Jesus it would be no big deal

If evangelism was merely a matter of telling someone about Jesus it would be no big deal to be equal to the task. All you would have to do is go up and talk to someone and give them a gospel tract. But Paul is talking about more than this. He is talking about spreading everywhere *the fragrance of the knowledge of him*. It is one thing to give someone a copy of the four spiritual laws; it is another thing to be *the aroma of Christ*.

Rolland and Heidi Baker are missionaries to Mozambique. In the March 2005 issue of Catch the Fire magazine, Rolland writes, "Heidi called me from Pemba (Mozambique) today to tell me about last night's outreach. Again an entire village was saved that had no previous gospel witness or knowledge of salvation in Jesus. And again a totally blind man saw." If you know anything about the ministry of the Bakers in Mozambique, you know that it has little to do with words and everything about spreading the fragrance of Jesus among the poor.

So who is equal to such a task? How can you be God's aroma of Christ to the world? Paul was confident that he and his companions were just that. Yet, he says, *Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant.*

Obviously, if we want to be effective ministers of the gospel, our ministry has to go beyond words or even affection. We have to be filled with Jesus so that his fragrance exudes from us. Then we will be equal to the task.

2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6

August 5

We Have Renounced Secret and Shameful Ways

Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. - Ephesians 2:18

However you might understand the relatedness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to each other, it is clear that each have distinct roles in terms of their relatedness to us. This can be seen in Paul's statement to the Ephesians regarding the ministry of Jesus for both the Jew and the Gentile. He says, "*Through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.*"

Paul's main point in this statement does not have so much to do with some sort of a description of the Godhead as it does with the fact that Jesus has reconciled both Jews and Gentiles *to God through the cross* (2:16) making them *one new man* (v15) giving both Jew and Gentile equal access to the Father. But secondarily, in this statement that it is *through* Jesus and *by* the Spirit that we have that access to the Father, we gain some insight into the functionality of the triune Godhead, at least in terms of how we relate to each of the three persons.

We relate to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit according to their function

Here is another case where Paul's use of prepositions is very meaningful in understanding the functional relationship of what is commonly known as the Trinity (see also 1 Corinthians 8:6 and page 199). The prepositions, *through* and *by*, are the very things which differentiate the role of Jesus and the role of the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the way to the Father and the Holy Spirit is the means. "*No one comes to the Father except through me,*" Jesus said (Jn 14:6). Jesus is "*the way.*" The function of the Holy Spirit is different. He is the effectual means. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that we become convicted of sin, receive a revelation of the gospel, are born again, are transformed into the image of Jesus, are empowered for ministry, are taken into the presence of God and whatever else the will of God calls for in our lives.

It has been said that form follows function—that function determines form. In the midst of some theological clutter regarding the nature of the triune Divinity, perhaps comprehending the functions of the three distinct persons of the Godhead will help us to comprehend their form. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one in nature. That is why they can be said to be "Triune" (a more helpful term than "Trinity"). They are three, yet one. They are the same in essence, yet they are distinct in person, position and function.

The fact is, we relate to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit differently. We relate to them according to their function. We relate to the Father as God, to the Son as the perfect image of God who makes the way to the Father, and to the Spirit as the empowering means of that access.

Ephesians 3:7-4:6

August 30

The Gift of God's Grace

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.... -Ephesians 1:17-18

Effectual knowledge of the Lord does not come through rote exercise or from listening to sermons. It comes by divine revelation. It seems that Paul had a recurring prayer for the believers at Ephesus. It was a prayer that he kept praying, a request that he kept making. What he wanted for the Ephesians, and most likely for all the churches under his charge, was that God would give them *the Spirit of wisdom and revelation* so that they could know the Lord better.

One of the most respected pastors in my city, a true spiritual father by the name Raymond Reub, has been preaching the gospel for fifty years. Brother Reub commented to me privately one day, “The longer I have been in the ministry, the more I have become convinced that my people never get what they need from my preaching apart from Holy Spirit revelation”—this from a man who is no slouch in the pulpit. If this is true, then you can understand why Paul would say, *I keep asking that...God...may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.* And if that wasn’t enough, Paul added, *I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened.*

If we are going to know the truth and be free, God has to reveal it to us

I too am convinced that real and lasting change comes most effectively by spiritual revelation. It is the truth that sets us free, and really, only God knows the truth: The truth about the universe; the truth about salvation; the truth about us—which means that if we are going to know the truth and be free, God has to reveal it to us. A single authentic message from God can change your life. We need the Spirit of wisdom to discern what is, and is not, of God and to know the right things to believe, say and do. We need the Spirit of revelation so that we can see what God would have us see and know what God would have us know. We need the eyes of our heart to be enlightened so that we can *know the hope to which he has called [us], the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe* (1:18-19).

Is it possible to know these things apart from his revelation? No. Are we supposed to somehow figure it out on our own or get it from our own understanding? Even having the revelation of the Bible will not be enough without Spirit inspired understanding. There was a good reason why Paul kept on asking God to give the Ephesians a spirit of wisdom and revelation.

August 29

Ephesians 2:11-3:6

Through Him We Have Access to the Father by One Spirit

Therefore, since through God's mercy we have this ministry, we do not lose heart. Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God...we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. -2 Corinthians 4:1-2

Secret and shameful ways are the surest way to undermine one’s life and ministry. The integrity of someone’s personal and ministerial well-being may not be totally compromised at the onset of covert sin, but shameful and secret conduct cause the favor of God to be removed and will erode the foundation of an upright life and ministry.

Paul was thanking God for the ministry he had been given. It was *through God’s mercy* that he had received his ministry in the Lord and, because of that, he, Silas and Timothy were committed to not losing heart in the midst of their severe trials. On the contrary, they would do everything to commend themselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. They did not want to compromise the integrity of their ministry by using deception or distorting the word of God. To make sure that their lives and ministries were everything they needed to be, Paul and his companions made it a point to *renounce secret and shameful ways.*

The verbal renunciation of secret sin will rip out the enemy’s legal right

Abraham Lincoln was quoted as saying, “You can fool some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.” More importantly, you can’t fool God any of the time. We all know this is true but, because God in his mercy does not typically expose and punish secret sin immediately, we can get lulled into a sense that the consequence of our sin is not dangerously immanent. And it may not be. But *be sure that your sin will find you out* (Nu 32:23). The devil’s ploy to prevent you from becoming all that you can be is to get you involved in *secret and shameful ways.*

Shameful ways are usually secret and secret ways are usually that because they are shameful. What is Paul’s way of dealing with them? Renunciation. Renouncing is a very powerful tool in our arsenal in the war against the world, the flesh and the devil. If preceded by honest repentance, the verbal renunciation of secret sin will most often rip out the enemy’s legal right to intrude into your life with his wares. And if the renouncing is done in tandem with confession to a trusted confidant, the affect is bound to be greater and more lasting.

Paul did not want anything to compromise his life and ministry. For him to renounce secret and shameful ways was instinctive to the preservation of his character and ministry. May it also be with ours.

2 Corinthians 4:7-5:10

August 6

What is Seen is Temporary

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. -2 Corinthians 4:17-18

I had a friend in University named Eddie who had a saying that he liked to use. From time to time he would pronounce, “My mama didn’t raise no fool”. Well, chances are that your mama, if you were blessed to have one, didn’t raise no fool either. That is why when it comes to deciding if you are going to live your life for temporary things or eternal ones your choice is a “no-brainer”, right? I mean really. You’re not stupid. “*What is your life?*” James asks. “*You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes*” (Ja 4:14). Jesus said, “*What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?*” (Mk 8:36). And Jim Elliot said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

Was Eddie a fool? Well, if he is living his life for himself without any thought to storing up eternal treasures he was wrong about what his mama produced. Fools live for the here and now. If the things we see are temporary and the things we don’t see are eternal, the lasting reality is not in the here and now but in the forever and not yet. To focus only on what can be gained in this life is suicide. And compared to eternity, this life is nothing. That is why Paul can refer to all the scourging, stoning, nakedness, shipwrecks, rejection etc... that he received on behalf of the cause of Christ as *our light and momentary troubles*. Your life and your troubles are momentary and that trouble is not worthy to be compared to the eternal glory that far outweighs it. So, cut your regrets on the Day of Judgment. Don’t be foolish. Don’t squander what little precious time that in have in this life on things that won’t mean diddly in the next.

If you were told you had the choice between one day of service followed by a lifetime of riches or one day of riches followed by a lifetime of service, which would you choose? Well, “my mama didn’t raise no fool...” If eternity is a lifetime, our existence on earth is much less than a day. It is more like a mist, a vapor, which is gone as soon as it comes.

Did your mama raise a fool? How you spend your life in this life will tell.

If you were told you had the choice between one day of service followed by a lifetime of riches or one day of riches followed by a lifetime of service, which would you choose?

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession. -Ephesians 1:13-14
[Thanks to Dean Snyder for the original insight to this scripture]

Marital engagements in biblical times had some similarities and differences from what we know in modern western culture. The Hebrew “betrothal” (see Deuteronomy 28:30) was closer by degree to actual marriage than what an “engagement” would be today. It usually lasted for one year and could only be broken by a “divorce” (i.e., Joseph and Mary). In New Testament times and locales, different cultures had their own form of marital engagements. One practice that the Ephesians would have understood was the granting of a man’s seal to the woman who would be his wife. Instead of an engagement ring, as we know it, the man would give his betrothed his personal or family seal or signet ring. The family seal or signet ring was used to make an impression in soft wax or clay, giving authenticity and verification to that which was sealed—be it a letter, a decree or a promissory note. The seal was not only the woman’s pledge of engagement; it also invested her with the authority of her betrothed. She could take this seal into the marketplace and make purchases, using the seal as the guarantee of payment.

The Holy Spirit is our engagement ring

In light of this, what did Paul mean when he said, “*Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession?*” The Holy Spirit, in a sense, is our engagement ring. We have not only been sealed by him, he is our seal—our signet ring. He has been given as a promise—a *pledge* (NASB) guaranteeing our redemption and heavenly union with Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit as Jesus’ promise that he will one day return for us, his bride. In addition, as we go into the marketplace to do our Betrothed’s bidding, we go with the “signature” of his authority in hand. We go with the authority of our Heavenly Groom because we have been sealed with the Holy Spirit and are endued with his power.

In the Song of Songs, the Beloved calls out to the Lover to “*Place me like a seal over your heart*” (8:6). Jesus has given us his seal to be placed over our hearts: The blessed Holy Spirit.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. -Galatians 6:9-10

Claudio Freidzon pastors a church of over 20,000 people in Buenos Aires, Argentina. But for the first seven years of his ministry, the church was no more than a handful of people, made up mostly of his family and a few older ladies. Can you imagine coming to church each Sunday not knowing whether your congregational attendance will hit double digits? Claudio, naturally, was discouraged and finally went to the District Superintendent of his denomination in order to give his resignation. Before he could do so the Superintendent exhorted him to not to become weary in doing good for soon he would reap a harvest. Claudio decided to stick it out a little while longer. The church grew to a hundred people and then, through a sovereign and supernatural move of God, the church grew to two thousand people in a three week period.

Human nature has it that we want to give up when we don't see the results that we are after

Human nature has it that we want to give up when we don't see the results that we are after. We become *weary in well-doing* (KJV). But Paul admonishes us to not become weary in doing good, *for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up*. And oh, how we want to give up sometimes. But if God has called us to do certain things, we should keep on keepin' on. Our job, first and foremost, is not to get results; it is to be faithful in doing good. It's not that we don't have in mind to see the fruit of our action. The reason we labor is to see some results—a "harvest" as Paul calls it. But producing the results is God's responsibility, not ours. Jeremiah preached for twenty-plus years without a single "convert." I would have gotten discouraged after about the first six months (or less). And Jeremiah did get discouraged. But the word of God was like fire shut up in his bones and he had no choice but to keep the faith and not grow weary in well-doing. Sure, if you are not seeing the results that you think you ought to see, you need to take a look at your calling and your methods. But in most cases, the solution is not to bow out but to persevere in doing good.

Paul is telling us to *not become weary in doing good—to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers*. Whatever it is that you are called to, don't give up. At the proper time, you will reap a harvest.

Ephesians 1:1-14

August 27

You Were Marked in Him with a Seal

2 Corinthians 5:11-21

August 7

We Regard No One from a Worldly Point Of View

From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! -2 Corinthians 5:16-17

Steven Covey tells of his experience while riding on a train one peaceful Sunday morning. Everything was calm until a man and his children entered the train car. The man sat next to Covey and closed his eyes while his children proceeded to run wild. They yelled and threw things at each other, even grabbing a passenger's newspaper out of his hands. Covey and the other passengers became more than a little irritated, not only at the children but, at the father who just sat and did nothing about the situation. Finally, Covey turned to the man and said, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you could control them a little more?" The man came out of his daze and said "I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago." You can imagine how Steven Covey's viewpoint then changed as well as way he approached the man and his children.

How you see and understand people will make all the difference in how you will treat them

How you see and understand people will make all the difference in how you will treat them. And for us Christians, the way not to look at people is from a worldly point of view. We are not to look at people according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. If we look at people the way the world does, we will see one way. If we look at them the way that Jesus does, we will see them another. Before the Damascus road, Paul saw everything, including the Lord Jesus, from a carnal viewpoint. But after his salvation he began to look at everyone as potential new creatures in Christ—people whom Jesus loved and for whom he died. That's why he said, *"From now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view."*

It is not about a Pollyanna, rose-colored, mushy, unsanctified mercy point of view; it is about whether you will look at people according to the truth of how the Spirit of Jesus sees them. You can see what God sees, love what God loves and hate what God hates. We, simply, are to look at no one from a worldly point of view.

For me, to do this is as simple as turning on a light switch. I can be in the grocery store, for instance, and find myself making judgments from a carnal viewpoint about people I don't even know. But all I have to do is hit the switch and start looking through the eyes of the Spirit. The difference is amazing and, in the process, I not only see others differently, I become different.

2 Corinthians 6:1-7:1

August 8

Perfecting Holiness Out Of Reverence for God

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. -2 Corinthians 7:1

Paul has just given a pointed and unambiguous message to the Corinthians regarding the hazards of being yoked together with unbelievers and having fellowship with the world. He then quotes Isaiah and Ezekiel: *“Therefore come out from them and be separate,” says the Lord. “Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty”* (2 Co 6:17-18). The promise is that if the people of God will come out from the defilement of the world, then God will receive them and they will have fellowship with him as one has fellowship with a loving Father. Paul does not want the Corinthians to forfeit this promise of fellowship with God, so he says, *“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.*

Reverence for the Lord will deter us from sinning and bring us into a more perfect place of holiness before him

Your theological perspective may not readily lend itself to accepting the notion that we can purify ourselves—only the sacrificial blood of Jesus can cleanse us from our sin, of course. But there are things for the Christian that can still *contaminate body and spirit*; things like lust, greed, envy, and gluttony, to name a few. It is our responsibility, once the cleansing forgiveness of the Lord is ours, to make sure that the defilement of the world stays off of us. Isn't this what Jesus meant when he said to Peter, *“A person who has had a bath needs only to wash his feet; his whole body is clean”* (Jn 13:10)? Paul said that *if a man cleanses himself...he will be an instrument for noble purposes* (2 Ti 2:21). How do we do that? By repenting, renouncing and resisting.

According to this passage in 2 Corinthians, there is a fourth “r” word to keep in mind; it is “Reverencing.” Paul says that we perfect our holiness *out of reverence for God*. On thunderous Mt. Sinai, Moses told the people, *“The fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning”* (Ex 20:20). Doesn't it make sense that reverence for the Lord will deter us from sinning and bring us into a more perfect place of holiness before him? Certainly, our love for him is the greatest motivator in rejecting anything that would hinder divine fellowship, but if we truly know him, we can't help revering him.

God's desire to have a holy people has never changed. In Jesus, we have been given the opportunity to be free from everything that defiles and to function in genuine holiness. Let's do it.

So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature...Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. -Galatians 5:16-17, 25

I believe the key to living a victorious Christian life is keeping in step with the Spirit. *“Since we live by the Spirit,”* Paul says, *“let us keep in step with the Spirit.”* It should be clear that we do not live the Christian life under our own inspiration or power. We are to *live by the Spirit*. Jesus' disciples were told not to do anything until the Holy Spirit had come. Jesus himself did not do anything out of step with what he saw, by the Spirit, the Father doing. The key to walking as Jesus walked (1 Jn 2:6) is to *keep in step with the Spirit*.

In Galatians 5, Paul contrasts the *acts of the sinful nature* and the *fruit of the Spirit*. The sinful nature or, more literally, “the flesh,” produces *sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like* (vs 19-21). The Spirit of God produces *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control* (vs 22-23). It is quite a contrast. And to produce the fruit of the Spirit we must *keep in step with the Spirit*.

If you are indulging the flesh, you are alienating the Spirit. If you are walking in the Spirit, you are killing the flesh.

Christians often ask how they can have victory over the flesh. Paul's answer is, *“Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”* *The sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other.* The flesh and the Spirit lay poles apart. If you are indulging the flesh, you are alienating the Spirit. If you are walking in the Spirit, you are killing the flesh. It really is that simple.

To keep in step with the Spirit is something like what a square dancer does when he or she responds to the caller of the dance. The dancer listens to, depends on and moves with the instructions of the square dance caller. The square dance works only if the dancers keep in step with the call. If they do their own thing or if they delay in their response it throws everything off and the other dancers have to adjust to the dancer who is out of step.

So, keep in step with the Spirit. It is the key to victory in the Christian life.

Galatians 6

August 26

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free...You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. -Galatians 5:1, 13

Why did Jesus set us free? It's not that hard to figure out. Anyone who has any amount of compassion can understand why Jesus did it. If you came across a dog caught in a trap, you would want to free it. Why? For no other reason than so it could be free. The price Jesus paid for our freedom was enormous. He saw our predicament and our inability to free ourselves. That is what motivated the Father to give his Son to die on the cross.

One summer night about bedtime, my wife heard the bloodcurdling screams of a young girl crying for help outside. I called a young man who was living with us and we went out to try to discover what was going on. We came across the girl dangling from a walking bridge that crosses a ravine a block from our house. In the process of attempting to hang herself with a bicycle chain (can you fathom?), her foot got entangled in the chain and she ended up hanging from her leg and her neck fourteen feet above the ravine. She had panicked and called out for help.

Why did Jesus set us free?

Some people who had arrived before us had called 911 and the emergency crews were fast on the scene. When they arrived, there she was, dangling from the bridge. A fireman got a ladder from the truck and four of our city's finest held the ladder while the young man from our home held the flashlight for them to see. Everyone, and I mean everyone, was greatly relieved as she was rescued from harm. Can you imagine any person there on the scene who would be content to leave her hanging there? Can you imagine anyone there not doing all within their power to see her released from her plight? We all wanted her to be free. Why? Simply so that she could be free. And once she was free from that predicament, I couldn't help but long for her to be free from whatever caused the tragic circumstance in the first place.

Jesus set us free from the curse of the law (Ga 3:13) and the bondage of sin (Ro 6:16-22). His sacrifice behooves us to keep that freedom yet there are two ways to lose it. One is to do what the Galatians were doing—letting themselves become yoked again by the slavery of the law. This is what Paul was warning them against. But Paul also says, *“You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.”* Because, what happens if you use your freedom to indulge your flesh? You lose your freedom, becoming a slave again to sin.

As much as we wanted to see that young girl set free, Jesus desires even more to see you free. It is for the sake of your freedom that Jesus set you free. And for the sake of that freedom, do all you can to keep it.

Galatians 5:16-26

August 25

Let Us Keep in Step with the Spirit

Godly Sorrow

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you... -2 Corinthians 7:10-11

There is a difference between what Paul calls *godly sorrow* and what he calls *worldly sorrow*. The first leads to *salvation* and the second is a dead end. Let's take a look.

You probably know and have seen the difference between someone who was sorry he got caught doing something wrong and someone who had heartfelt sorrow for the wrong he had done. Both Saul and David sinned. Saul had worldly sorrow (see 1 Samuel 15:10-31) that was no deterrent to the judgment of God or his eventual tragic death. David had godly sorrow (see 2 Samuel 12; Psalm 51) which produced true repentance which, in turn, brought restoration to his life. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.* Those who exhibit godly sorrow and true repentance never regret doing so. How could they? Even though there may be unalterable consequences to their sin (as in the case with David), the freedom and life that flow from a state of contriteness before the Lord is incomparably greater.

Are they sorry they got caught or are they sorry that they disobeyed?

A woman I know recently had to separate from her abusive husband. He has said that he is sorry but it seems he is more sorry about the fact that she left him than the reality that he was abusive to her. He is exhibiting worldly sorrow but none of the fruit of true repentance. What he needs is godly sorrow—the understanding and heartfelt acceptance of the conviction of the Holy Spirit that he has sinned against God and his wife. Notice that the godly sorrow precedes repentance. This was certainly what Peter experienced as he *wept bitterly* (Lk 22:62) following his denial of Christ. Judas, on the other hand, evidently had only a worldly sorrow full of demonic condemnation when he hung himself after betraying the Lord.

Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”* (Mt 5:4). More than the grief of loss, godly sorrow is the kind of mourning that will be blessed. Jesus is speaking of those who mourn the state of their impoverished souls. Just as Paul says that godly sorrow leads to salvation, Jesus says that this kind of mourning will lead to being comforted. It is the kind of “mourning” that you look for in your children after they have disobeyed. Are they sorry they got caught or are they sorry that they disobeyed? You can comfort the latter but not the former.

Godly sorrow will always lead to life. Don't ever be ashamed of it or hinder it from doing its good work.

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

August 10

See That You Excel In This Grace of Giving

But just as you excel in everything--in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us--see that you also excel in this grace of giving. -2 Corinthians 8:7

Some of the best New Testament theology concerning giving is found in 2 Corinthians. The 39 verses of chapters eight and nine make up the most extensive block of teaching devoted to the subject in the Scriptures. As we read what Paul has to say about giving, it becomes apparent that the best way to understand the operation of giving in the church is to understand it as a “grace.”

Six times in Paul’s discourse he uses the term “grace” in relation to giving. He begins by saying, “*We want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability... (8:1-2).* To give with overflowing joy and rich generosity out of extreme poverty and a severe trial takes grace. Remember that grace is not adequately defined as “unmerited favor” but as “God’s enabling power.” God enables us to give no matter what our circumstances may be. *God loves a cheerful giver (9:7)* and how else can you give cheerfully and *be generous on every occasion (9:11)* unless God enables you to do so? So, Paul reminds the Corinthians about the grace that God had given the Macedonian churches and says, “*See also that you excel in this grace of giving.*”

Notice that he says, “*I am not commanding you....*” The New Testament concept is that giving is not done *reluctantly or under compulsion (9:7)* but by the working of grace in a person’s heart. This is a very important distinction as compared to the obligatory giving commanded under The Law. This is also the essential difference regarding salvation under the Old Covenant and under the New. Under the Old Covenant, salvation was to be obtained by obligatory observance of The Law. Under the New Covenant, salvation comes by the working of grace in a person’s heart to believe the gospel. *By grace you are saved through faith (Eph 2:8).*

The Corinthian church had been enabled by God to excel in the gifts of the Spirit (the Greek word for gifts, “charisma” comes from the word for grace, “charis”). Now Paul wanted them to excel in the *grace of giving*. When you give according to grace, you are not limited by circumstance, convention or the law. And this is true New Testament giving.

The best way to understand the operation of giving in the church is to understand it as a “grace.”

2 Corinthians 8:16-9:5

August 11

Not Only in the Eyes of the Lord but also in the Eyes of Men

You welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself. What has happened to all your joy? I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me. Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth? -Galatians 4:14-16

The one who will tell you the truth may feel like your enemy, but he or she is not. And the one who tells you what you want to hear at the expense of the truth may feel like your friend, but he or she is not.

Paul describes his initial encounter with the Galatians in glowing terms. The Galatians received Paul and the gospel message wholeheartedly. It was *because of an illness*, Paul says, that he first preached the gospel to them. We can only speculate what kind of illness it was and how it played out that Paul ended up preaching to them as a result, but Paul says, “*Even though my illness was a trial to you, you did not treat me with contempt or scorn. Instead, you welcomed me as if I were an angel of God, as if I were Christ Jesus himself*” (4:14). Obviously, Paul was warmly welcomed by the Galatians and had become their friend, so much so that he says, “*I can testify that, if you could have done so, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me*” (an indication that Paul’s illness might have had something to do with his eyes).

A true friend will do what’s in your best interest and that means telling you the truth

So, Paul was held in high regard by the churches of Galatia. But now he has to exhort and rebuke them concerning a dangerous leaven they had allowed to enter and spread through the church. It’s not the kind of letter that Paul would have ideally liked to have written. He hits fast and he hits hard regarding the error of their ways. He then reminds them of their original regard for him and then rhetorically asks, “*Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?*”

No one enjoys being rebuked. Nobody likes to hear that they are wrong. People can feel annoyed or even betrayed when they are told the truth about something that is not right in their lives. A couple whom my wife and I care about became offended when we wrote them a note saying we were concerned that their seven-year-old was not getting a healthy diet (he was allowed to eat ice cream cones for breakfast). Had we become their enemies by telling them the truth?

A true friend will do what’s in your best interest, and, with rare exception, that means telling you the truth. If it is the truth, then it is the best thing that you can hear, even if it is difficult. So, don’t take offense when someone tells you the truth. It may be your best friend speaking.

Galatians 5:1-15

August 24

It Is for Freedom That Christ Has Set Us Free

When we were children, we were in slavery under the basic principles of the world. But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. -Galatians 4:3-5

Michael Green, in his benchmark book, “Evangelism in the Early Church,” recaps the work of many earlier theologians who had observed that the timing of the coming of Jesus in world history could not have been more perfect for the spread of the gospel message. Three major factors were at work to make this so. First was the “Pax Romana,” or the Roman peace. Green says, “The spread of Christianity would have been inconceivable had Jesus been born half a century earlier.” Because the Romans ruled virtually the entire world, Jesus, and the church, were born into a “time of peace unparalleled in world history.” Add to this the remarkable road system built by the Romans, we find that the entire known world was suddenly accessible to the gospel. The second major factor was the pervasiveness of Greek culture—especially its language. Greek had become an “almost universal common tongue”—no language school for missionaries needed. Greek thought also prepared the way for the gospel in that, despite the earlier mythologies, Greek thought lent itself to the acceptance of a monotheistic and personal God and a rejection of “enthusiastic cults” and superstitions. The third, and no less important, factor was the prior spread of Judaism in the world. “The Christian faith grew best and fastest on Jewish soil,” says Green, and that soil was found far and wide.

The timing of the coming of Jesus in world history could not have been more perfect for the spread of the gospel message

When the time had fully come, God sent his Son. God knows the end from the beginning and everything in between. It was no mere coincidence that Jesus came when he did. He was at the right place at the right time—and not by chance. The exact hour of Jesus’ coming and his going had been determined by the Father—as will be the hour of his return.

The context in which Paul writes suggests that there was another preparatory factor marking the fullness of time for the coming of Jesus. The people of God had been under the guardianship of the law long enough. It was time for the promises which were given to Abraham to be fulfilled. The heir does not gain full possession of the estate until he grows up and no longer needs to live under a trustee. It was time for the heirs to *receive the full rights as sons* and come out from under the guardianship of the law through the redemptive work of Jesus. So, *when the time had fully come, God sent his Son.*

Galatians 4:8-31

August 23

Have I Now Become Your Enemy by Telling You the Truth?

We want to avoid any criticism of the way we administer this liberal gift. For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men. -2 Corinthians 8:20-21

We know that the great men and women of God, including our Lord, were not afraid of criticism and did not let the opinion or the fear of man sway them from pursuing and doing the will of God. This was, in fact, part of what made them great. So how is it, then, that Paul speaks of wanting to *avoid any criticism* and of *taking pains* to conduct himself to be seen as doing right *in the eyes of men*?

Paul was talking about handling money and when it comes to handling money we have to be extra careful to do what is right, *not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.* A lot of damage has been done to the reputation of the church and the cause of Christ because of the misappropriation or even the perceived misappropriation of funds. I am sure that of all the different criticisms that the church receives from the world, far more numerous than any other is the criticism regarding how we collect, handle and administer the money that we receive. Much of the criticism is unfounded but, alas, much of it is valid. And even if a particular criticism is not valid and it merely looks like there could be a problem, we have, as a result, created a problem for the gospel by not being totally circumspect in the way we handle money.

When it comes to handling money, the church is to be extra careful to do what is right.

I am thinking specifically of a great evangelist who has come under fire recently from the secular media regarding his lifestyle and the lack of accountability that seems all too apparent with the ministry’s finances. When the way you handle your finances doesn’t pass the smell test, there is a serious problem and everything that can be done should be done to rectify the situation.

Those in the ministry need to be *above reproach* (1 Tim 3:2). We must not be liable to criticism, especially when it comes to the way we handle money. The reason that the early church laid their money at the feet of the apostles is because they were seen as completely trustworthy. Trust is the most important commodity in the ministry of the gospel. Daniel was a man who was *neither corrupt nor negligent* (Da 6:4). He was above reproach and accusation in all his dealings.

Criticism for the sake and the name of Jesus is one thing and will never be able to be avoided. But when it comes to the administration of the Lord’s money, criticism is to be avoided with painstaking care.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

August 12

Not Reluctantly or Under Compulsion

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. -2 Corinthians 9:6-7

No one likes a grudging giver. There is not much joy in receiving something from someone who really does not want to give it. The book of Proverbs talks about the *stingy man...who is always thinking about the cost*. He invites you to eat at his table, but *his heart is not with you*. The whole experience makes you want to *vomit up the little you have eaten* (see 23:6-8). I don't know if God feels like throwing-up when we give grudgingly but *God loves a cheerful giver*, not one who gives *reluctantly or under compulsion*.

Giving freely and cheerfully is the mark of New Testament giving. It is not that people didn't give freely in the Old Testament record—there are dozens examples of such. But the entire tenor of the Law of Moses was one of compulsion. That is the nature of the law. For the Pharisees, who were sticklers for the Law, it wasn't a matter of each one giving *what he has decided in his heart to give*; it was a matter of religiously paying (not giving) a tithe of everything that they received in order to fulfill the requirements of an external and objective standard. The Pharisees would have given no less than the tithe but I doubt that they would have given any more.

Giving under the New Covenant is different. It is a joy to give and the standard is not the tithe but to *be generous on every occasion* (v11). When the first Christians gave they did so freely and cheerfully and not under compulsion (see Acts 4:32-35). They decided in their hearts what they wanted to give and gave—under no compulsion to do so. Does this mean that tithing is not meant to be the pattern for giving in the New Testament Church? Despite what most of us pastors would want to believe, there is no such prescription in the pages of the New Testament—none. If someone decides in their heart that they want to give ten percent to the Lord and his work—that is great. Many in the church pay their tithe cheerfully and give offerings on top of that. But many others part with it as cheerfully as they do their taxes. They see it as an obligation. They will pay no more and no less and once they are paid up they consider themselves absolved from any need to listen to what the Lord has to say about their giving or their finances.

God loves cheerful and generous givers. This is the New Testament pattern. This is the state of heart and mind and the practice to which we should aspire.

2 Corinthians 10

August 13

We Take Captive Every Thought

Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort? ...Does God give you his Spirit and work miracles among you because you observe the law, or because you believe what you heard? -Galatians 3:2, 3, 5

Paul was none too happy about what was happening in the churches of Galatia. They were turning to a “gospel” where observing the law was replacing faith in Christ as preeminent for salvation. “*You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*” was Paul’s lament (3:1). As he makes his case for them to consider what they are doing by turning from the gospel of grace to one of works, Paul says, “*I would like to learn just one thing from you...*” If they would consider the question he was about to ask, they could perhaps come to see the error of their ways. “*...Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?*”

When the Galatians first heard the gospel, they believed, and God poured out his Spirit upon them with miracles as part of the outpouring. It was a confirmation of the message Paul had preached to them—the gospel of faith in Christ. But some people had come in with a different gospel, throwing the Galatian churches into confusion. *After beginning with the Spirit* they were now *trying to attain* [their] *goal by human effort*. Thus, the question, “*Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard?*”

Of course, Paul’s question is rhetorical. They did not receive the Spirit by observing the law. They received him, and their salvation, when they believed. “You’re supposed to dance with the one who brung ya,” Paul was saying. Well, the Galatians were not dancin’ with the one who brung ‘em. When was it they received the Holy Spirit and God did miracles among them? It was when they believed the message of the gospel of grace.

The obvious lesson is that God will not pour out his Spirit in response to a group of people trying to observe the law—the Spirit is poured out in response to faith. The implication in what Paul says to the Galatians is that now that they were relying on *human effort*, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the working of miracles were no longer be part of their experience. A move from faith to legalistic righteousness will quench the Spirit of God every time. *The letter kills but the Spirit gives life* (2 Co 3:6). So if you are in a situation where the Spirit of God is no longer being poured out, check the possibility that you have moved from faith to an undue reliance on human effort.

Galatians 3:15-4:7

August 22

When the Time Had Fully Come

The Pharisees would have given no less than the tithe but I doubt that they would have given any more

A move from faith to legalistic righteousness will quench the Spirit of God every time

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. -Galatians 2:11

It was probably not often that the two most towering personalities in the New Testament church, Peter and Paul, had reason to be together. Just to experience the force of their presence and authority as apostles would have been unforgettable. Imagine what it might have been like to have them together, and then imagine what it would have been like to witness Paul publicly confront Peter as a hypocrite.

Paul was part of the leadership in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1). Peter came to visit the church and spend some time there, enjoying the integrated fellowship of the Jewish and Gentile believers. Then, *certain men came from James* (v12). These were Jews from the Jerusalem church in which James was the lead elder. They were part of what was known as the *circumcision group* (v12)—Jews who had argued that the Gentiles who had turned to Christ still needed to be circumcised and follow the law to be saved. Their campaign had been defeated (see Acts 15) but they, no doubt expected Jewish believers, like Peter, to continue to abide by the law. So when they arrived in Antioch, Peter bowed to their pressure and drew back from eating with the Gentile believers—influencing the other Jewish Christians to do the same. Believing that Peter was *was clearly in the wrong*, Paul confronted him in front of all.

At issue, as the NIV Bible Commentary points out, was not the freedom of the Gentile believers, but the freedom of the Jewish believers. Were they free to eat “unclean” food and to mix with the Gentiles? Before the group from Jerusalem had come, Peter was free. But when they arrived, Peter, obviously, was not, and his example curtailed the freedom of the other Jewish believers. And what about the alienation of the Gentile believers? No doubt, Peter’s actions brought division and rejection and caused the Gentile brothers and sisters to feel like second-class citizens in the kingdom.

Did Paul need to confront Peter publicly? Yes. Peter was a public figure and his sin was a public one with public ramifications (the Matthew 18 prescription is a different one for dealing with someone who sins against another personally). In opposing Peter to his face, Paul was not only contending for the truth of the gospel but for the well-being of the flock in Antioch for which he and the other elders there had direct oversight.

No leader, even an apostle, is infallible. Praise God that Paul had the integrity and fortitude to stand for what was right and publicly do what no one else was willing to do.

Galatians 3:1-14

August 21

Did You Receive the Spirit by Observing the Law?

We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. -2 Corinthians 10:5

The battle for the mind is the most consequential battle that we face. If I can get you to think a certain way I can control you. If I can get society to think a certain way I can control society. Personal freedom, eternal well-being and the knowledge of God is contingent on what I believe. How important is it then that what I think conform to the truth found in Christ?

In defense of his ministry, Paul reflects on the battle for the truth in which he is engaged. His warfare is unlike the world’s where physical force is used to conquer. He knows that the greater battle is against false philosophies, ungodly strongholds, strange teachings and demonic temptations. He is out to *demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God*. He is not interested in human prisoners. He wants to *take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ*.

The battle for the mind is real and incessant

The battle continues today—as hot and as consequential as ever. *The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers* (2 Cor 4:4), as well as many confessing Christians, with *speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God* (NASB). In Paul’s day it was Gnosticism, legalism, paganism, mythology.... In our day it is relativism, universalism, liberalism, new age, atheistic science.... And, always thrown in with the mix are the enticements to commit sin. The battle for the mind is real and incessant.

Despite the relentless reality of the battle, we can be sure that the weapons with which we fight that battle are more than adequate. Our weapons *have divine power to demolish strongholds* (v4). We have truth, love and power (see 2 Corinthians 6:6-7). The lies and schemes of the enemy cannot stand against these three weapons—they really are *mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds* (KJV).

To the Colossians, Paul said, “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy...*” (Col 2:8). Either you take your thoughts captive or they will take you captive. But when you take every thought captive, whether they are deceptive philosophies or sinful enticements, and make them obedient to Christ, you have defeated the enemy and strengthened your position for further combat in the most important battle there is.

2 Corinthians 11:1-15

August 14

If You Receive a Different Spirit

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. -2 Corinthians 11:3-4

It is apparent from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that it is possible to receive a different kind of spirit than the Holy Spirit. He said that he was afraid that the Corinthians may have been led away from their devotion to Christ and *receive[d] a different spirit* from the one they had received when they first heard and believed the gospel. What did Paul mean by this and how are we to understand the existence and working of different spiritual entities?

The Bible uses the term "spirit" in different ways. Of course, we know that God is spirit and, being made in his image, in essence, so are we. We know that there is a Holy Spirit and there are evil spirits as well. The Bible also uses the term spirit to describe a person's spiritual state, saying, for instance, that a person could have a *gentle and quiet spirit* (1 Pet 3:4) or a *haughty spirit* (Pr 16:18). We also have examples in the Scriptures of good and bad "spirits" who have influence over individuals or groups of people. Specifically, the Bible refers to a Spirit (or spirit) *of wisdom and revelation* (Eph 1:17); *of counsel and power* (Is 11:2); *of grace and supplication* (Zec 12:10) and *of sonship* (Ro 8:15). It is clear from passages like Isaiah 11 that when the Bible refers to these different good spirits, it is describing the different characteristics and manifestations of the one and the same Holy Spirit. Antithetical to this are the characteristics and manifestations of not just one evil spirit but that of a plethora of different unclean and negative spirits, i.e., a *lying spirit* (1 Ki 22:22); a *deaf and mute spirit* (Mk 9:25) and a *spirit of antichrist* (1 Jn 4:3 KJV).

So, Paul was concerned that the Corinthians might *receive a different spirit*; that *just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning*, that an actual spiritual entity would get a foothold and lead them away from their *sincere and pure devotion to Christ*. Though many Christians do not acknowledge such entities, it is not hard to discern such spirits as greed, pride, lust, intellectualism, religion... that hold sway, not only individuals, but entire groups of people, geographical locations and, yes, even churches. Our job is to identify and repel any *different spirit* that would lead us from the truth and our devotion to Jesus.

2 Corinthians 11:16-12:6

August 15

Caught Up To the Third Heaven

How are we to understand the existence and working of different spiritual entities?

James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me. They agreed that we should go to the Gentiles, and they to the Jews. All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. -Galatians 2:9-10

Let me set the stage for you. Paul has been called by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. He has been doing so for a number of years but has yet to spend much time in Jerusalem where the early church is headquartered. In response to a revelation from the Lord, he goes to Jerusalem and privately meets with those *reputed to be pillars*—James, Peter and John. As Paul puts it, part of his agenda was to "*Set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles*" (Gal 2:2). In so doing, both he and the leaders of the church in Jerusalem would have confirmation that the gospel that Paul had received and was preaching was, in fact, the right stuff. So, he laid it out before them and they recognized that, indeed, Paul had been entrusted with the pure gospel. As a result, James, Peter and John *extended the right hand of fellowship* and blessed Paul's mission to the Gentiles. They had only one request. They had only one condition for their blessing on Paul's ministry. There was only one thing they wanted to make sure of. "*All they asked,*" Paul recounted, "*Was that we should continue to remember the poor.*"

Of all the things that the Apostles in Jerusalem could have requested or required of Paul, all they asked was that he continue to remember the poor. Now this, in large part, was due to the fact that Paul's gospel was the same as theirs. They did not have to correct him at all (which is the point that Paul is making to the Galatians). The "pillars" in Jerusalem did not add or take away from his message; it was given by God and affirmed by these who had personally walked with Christ. Still, there would have been a number of important things that the apostles in Jerusalem could have said to Paul as they sent him on his way. They could have told him to watch out for the Judaizers, or to remember to appoint elders in the churches. They could have given him a list of important teachings for the new Gentile converts. They could have consulted with him on where he should go to preach the gospel or how to handle the persecution that he was bound to face. But no—the most important thing was to make sure that wherever the gospel was preached and the church established, the poor would not be neglected.

Remembering the poor was a top priority in the early church. Is it still?

Galatians 2:11-21

August 20

I Opposed Him to His Face

They had only one condition for their blessing on Paul's ministry

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. -Galatians 1:6-7

There are a lot of different versions of the gospel—and I am not speaking of Bible translations. It is evident from what was happening to the Christians in Galatia that it is altogether possible to turn from the truth of the gospel to a mistaken facsimile thereof. A different “gospel” had come into the church and they were duped into accepting its tenets. Unfortunately, such an occurrence is all too common today.

The particular version of the gospel that had come to infiltrate the belief system of the Galatians was heavy on the observance of the law. But throughout the annals of the church there have been many other aberrations of the good news that have made the rounds and have knocked entire groups of believers off the standard of a biblical gospel. The first century church dealt not only with legalism but also with such things as Libertinism (see 1 Peter 2:16; Galatians 5:13), harsh asceticism and the worship of angels (see Colossians 2:18-23), people who said that the resurrection had already taken place (see 2 Timothy 2:18) and a teaching that Jesus did not really come in the flesh (see 2 John, v7). Soon after, the church was dealing with the major heresies of Gnosticism, which viewed all created matter as evil, and Arianism which denied the full and eternal deity of Jesus. Still later came such practices as praying to religious images and the selling of “indulgences” for the forgiveness of sin.

Today is no different. There are plenty of divergent gospels to choose from. There is the “Cessation/Dispensational” gospel which says that miracles ceased with the original apostles. There is the “Hyper-Grace” Gospel which says that it doesn’t matter if I sin because grace covers it all. Then there is the “Christian Universalism” that denies the reality of Hell. There are forms of Lutheranism and other high church religion which claim that baptism brings salvation. There is the “Prosperity Gospel” and the “once-saved, always-saved” gospel, both terribly prevalent. There are the Unitarians, the Christadelphians, the Mormons, the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Metropolitan Church, just to name a few, who have all, as Paul says, perverted the gospel of Christ.

There will always be people aroused to throw you into confusion with their deviant views. Be careful not to desert the one who calls you by his grace and turn to a different gospel, which would be no gospel at all.

Galatians 2:1-10

August 19

All They Asked Was That We Remember the Poor

I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows...this man...was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. -2 Corinthians 12:2-4

Have you ever known or heard someone who testified to have been taken to heaven? The first time that I met such a person I might have been more skeptical had I not just experienced from this man one of the most profound demonstrations of prophetic ministry I have ever witnessed. After this humble man ministered to our small home group of pastors and spouses we began to ask him about his life and ministry (he was unknown to most of us). He felt uncommonly released of the Lord to tell us about when he had been taken to heaven. The details were fascinating and encouraging and gave me a deeper desire for my heavenly home. It was just as if someone had gone off to a beautiful tropical “paradise,” had come back, showed me the photos and instilled in me a longing to go and see the place for myself.

Paul’s visit to heaven teaches us a few things about such experiences

Paul spoke of *a man in Christ* who had been *caught up to the third heaven*. He was speaking of himself, of course, although he couldn’t tell whether he was *in the body or out of the body* when he had gone. Paul probably traveled in spirit only but the experience was evidently so real to his senses (unlike a dream) that he couldn’t tell any difference. He was given a great privilege as he went and heard *inexpressible things* of the highest order.

Paul’s visit to heaven teaches us a few things about such experiences. First, he says that he was *in Christ*. We should be wary of such testimonies from those who don’t know God and even if they are valid occurrences from credible witnesses, they should not be used as foundational for theology. Second, he said that he was *caught up*. There are those who say that they can go to heaven at will by use of their imaginations. I can’t say for sure that such practice is invalid but Paul’s experience is an indication that if you are going to pay a visit to heaven you have to be taken. Third, Paul said the place he went was *the third heaven*. The third heaven is heaven as we commonly understand it—the place where God, Jesus, the angels and the saints dwell. It is also known as *Paradise* (see v4; Luke 23:43; Revelation 2:7). It is the “third” heaven in the sense that the physical heavens are the first and the *heavenly realms* (Eph 6:12) of unseen demonic and angelic activity over the earth are the second. Finally, these experiences are not to be bragged about and one must have the express permission of the Lord in specific situations to speak about them—otherwise one may become conceited and it could lead to being given a thorn in the flesh.

2 Corinthians 12:7-21

August 16

There Was Given Me A Thorn in My Flesh

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." -2 Corinthians 12:7-9

When you read about Paul's "thorn in the flesh," the first and most natural inclination is to wonder what this particular affliction might have been. The more important question, however, is how the Lord would allow, and even purpose, a messenger of Satan to torment the great apostle.

You would think it ironic that the reason Paul tells the Corinthians about his thorn in the flesh is to defend his apostolic authority. The experience of his torment at the hand of *a messenger of Satan* is actually used by Paul to argue that he is living under the favor of God. He was given heavenly experiences of *surpassingly great revelations* and to keep him *from becoming conceited* he was *given* this thorn in the flesh. There are other indications in the New Testament that those who walk in great favor and apostolic authority must, by means, suffer for the sake of that favor and authority (see Acts 9:16; 1 Corinthians 4:9-13).

Three times (the same number of times Jesus prayed in the Garden) Paul pleaded with the Lord to take his affliction away from him, but the answer came, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*" The power of the Lord was to be perfected in Paul's weakness and suffering (see also Hebrews 2:10). Paul's thorn in the flesh was given him to him, but by whom? If the devil was not concerned about Paul becoming conceited, and, certainly, he was not, then we must conclude that this thorn in Paul's flesh was of the Lord. "The Lord would never use a demon to fulfill his purpose," you might protest. But there are biblical cases where he has and will (see 1 Kings 22:22; Luke 22:3-4; 1 Corinthians 5:5).

Was Paul's circumstance extenuating? Certainly. The most natural question to ask in the midst of suffering is, "Why?" Many times the answer is not even close to being apparent, but in Paul's case it was clear. Affliction is to be resisted unless you have an explicit mitigating reason to submit to it, as Paul did. God can bring his redemptive purpose in any situation but always assume that his glory will be most revealed in your deliverance from your affliction rather than your submission to it. But know that there will be times when the Lord's purposes for the perfecting of your character will be found in drawing on his grace in the midst of suffering.

Affliction is to be resisted unless you have an explicit mitigating reason to submit to it

2 Corinthians 13

August 17

Examine Yourself to See Whether You Are In the Faith

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test? -2 Corinthians 13:5

Are there people in our churches who imagine that they are saved but they are not? How about people outside our churches who have a false sense of their place in God? Is this a prevalent and serious problem? If so, how important is Paul's advice to the Corinthians, "*Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith?*"

Assumption is an enemy of the truth. The path to hell is not only lined with good intentions, it is lined with bad assumptions. Do not assume that because you prayed a prayer, were baptized or have a spiritual pedigree that you are actually in the faith. It is amazing to me the answers that people give when you ask them about the basis for the assurance of their salvation. People are all too willing to believe what the enemy is all too willing to suggest and they end up building their eternal welfare on a house of cards. We assume and presume when we would do much better to test ourselves to see if we are really in the faith.

The path to hell is not only lined with good intentions, it is lined with bad assumptions

What is the basis for determining whether or not you are actually in the faith? The simple answer is whether or not Jesus is in your life. *He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life* (1 Jn 5:12). This is what must be tested, for Paul says, *Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?* On one level, you must examine yourself to see if Jesus is actually in your life. On another level, you must take spiritual inventory to determine to what degree the life of Christ is preeminent within you.

Let me propose a three-fold test. First is the authority of the word of God. It is *living and active and judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart* (He 4:12). Do you have a biblical faith? Does it line up with the promises and requirements of the word of God? Have you been born again? Next is the witness of the Spirit. *Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God...The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children* (Ro 8:14, 16). The third is the fruit test. If you are in the faith—if Jesus is really in your life—it will be evidenced by supernatural love, joy, peace, patience...(see Galatians 5:22-23). You will want to worship, witness and gather with God's people. The word of God will be your daily bread and prayer will be the water that refreshes your soul.

Are you in the faith? Don't just assume or presume. Test yourself.

Galatians 1

August 18

Turning to a Different Gospel