NPS Bible Study Lesson 1

MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #8: The Heart of a Servant

Introduction

In our quest for the marks of mature spirituality and leadership ability, we must not bypass that quality which so completely characterized the life of Jesus Christ, the quality of unselfish servanthood. Jesus said, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) The apostle Paul added to this focus when he wrote, “Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well” (Phil. 1:4). But then pointing to the Savior as our great example, he quickly added, “You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had.” Paul then followed this exhortation with a strong reminder of the humiliation of Christ (Phil. 2:6ff) who, though being God of very God, emptied himself by taking the form of a slave. There is no question that if we as Christians are going to grow and mature into Christ-like character, we must experience progress in giving of ourselves in ministry to and for others. While we can and should find comfort and encouragement in Christ (Phil. 2:1), when properly grasped, that comfort should propel us into servants of the Savior and one another. Servant living stands opposed to the primary concerns we see today where the focus of our culture and society is more on our own personal happiness and comfort.

The preoccupation with self today is readily seen in slogans like, “be all you can be” or “experience your potential” and in the titles and subtitles of books like The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life; The Total Woman; Joy in Sex, More Joy in Sex, and the list goes on and on. While many of these books may contain biblical truth or genuine help in dealing with certain problems people face as human beings, the message, whether explicit or implicit, suggests the prime goal we should be pursuing is our own comfort and the experience of some form of self-expression rather than growth in the character and quality of the life of the Savior. Simply put, our modern day society, and this includes a great number of Christians, is focused on making satisfaction its goal, indeed, its religion. There is much more concern for self-fulfillment than for pleasing God and truly serving Him and others as seen in the life of Jesus. Typical of today is the enormous number of how-to-books not just for the secular world, but for the Christian community. These are aimed at directing us to more successful relationships, becoming more of a person, realizing one’s potential, experiencing more thrills each day, whipping ourselves into shape, improving our diet, managing our money, and on it goes. Again, while many of these things are important and have their place, it does take the focus off what is truly the heart of Christianity—knowing and loving God, and out of that resource and relationship, living as servants in the power of the Spirit according to the example of Christ.

But what exactly is servanthood? Servanthood is the state, condition, or quality of one who lives as a servant. Further, a servant is first of all one who is under submission to another. For Christians, this means submission to God first, and then submission to one another. Then, as one in submission, a servant is one who seeks to meet the real needs of others or of the person he is serving. To put it another way, servanthood is the condition or state of being a servant to others, of ministry to others rather than the service of self. It means willingly giving of oneself to minister for and to others and to do whatever it takes to accomplish what is best for another.

However, when serving others and their needs, if the underlying motive and goal is some form of self love, like the praise of others for the service rendered, then one’s service is in reality hypocritical. This type of service is really aimed at serving selfish ends—usually in the futile pursuit of personal significance through something like praise, power, or status.

Christ’s plan and that which produces maximum blessing to the world and the church is servanthood. A servant is one who, even when in positions of leadership seeks to lead and influence others through lives given in ministry for the blessing of others and their needs. As the following passages will demonstrate, the Lord Jesus came as a servant with a commitment to serve. Just think, if He had come to be served, our redemption could and would never have taken place. Likewise, our failure to live as servants throws up a huge barrier to effective ministry as representatives of the Lord Jesus.

Components of Servanthood from New Testament Passages

Since servant living was epitomized so completely by the Lord Jesus, we would naturally expect a number of passages to explicitly deal with this issue. While space will not allow an indepth exegesis, it is hoped that the following highlights drawn from several New Testament passages will draw our attention to a few vital principles that describe the spiritually mature quality of living as servants.

MATTHEW 20:20-28 (SEE ALSO MARK 10:35-45)

20:20 Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to him with her sons, and kneeling down she asked something from him.20:21 He said to her, “What do you want?” She said, “Permit these two sons of mine to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.” 20:22 Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” 20:23 He told them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right and left is not mine to give. Rather, it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.” 20:24 When the other ten heard this, they were angry with the two brothers. 20:25 But Jesus called them and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those in high position use their authority over them. 20:26 It must not be this way among you! But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant. 20:27 And whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 20:28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

A consideration of Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45 shows us that there are basically two options open for people. Either we will seek to serve ourselves, a choice that nullifies our capacity to live as disciples, or we will learn to live as servants out of a faith relationship with God through Christ. In Matthew 6, the Lord stated it this way, “No one is able to serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. No one is able to serve God and possessions” (Matt. 6:24). When we serve money, we are really serving ourselves and our own desires for what we think money will purchase like significance, power, pleasure, security, or status. Money is not evil and having it is not evil, but if it becomes our master, it controls our values, priorities, and pursuits rather than God, and that is evil (see 1 Tim. 6:8-10).

Christ shows that His organization or organism, the body of Christ, is to function on the basis of service or servant-like ministry to others. Spiritually mature people who experience His life are those who have first of all developed a servant’s heart like that of the Savior. Thus, a true concept of mature Christian leadership means serving one’s followers and teaching them by example to be servants of others.

A mother approached the Lord, probably at the request of her sons, and sought a position of status for them. Why? Foolishly thinking that such status would give them happiness and significance, they wanted positions of authority, praise, and power. Our Lord’s answer showed that first of all they had been wrongly influenced by the attitudes of the world (vs. 25). Rather than thinking with the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5; 1 Cor. 2:16b) as His disciples should think, they were thinking like an unregenerate world. Thus, if they were to serve as His disciples, their thinking and orientation needed drastic transformation (see Rom. 12:1-8).

Naturally, the model for mature spirituality and leadership and all Christian living is the Lord Jesus. It is instructive to note that in this context of serving, He spoke of Himself as the Son of Man. This was a favorite designation of Himself (one used some 90 times) and a Messianic title based on Daniel 7:13-14. As such, it linked Him to the earth and to His mission, but it also stressed His pre-eminence, dignity, and authority (see Luke 6:5; John 6:62). The contrast between who He was, the Son of Man, and what He did, humble Himself, is stressed by the word “even” as given in Mark 10:45, “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve…” This Messianic title draws our attention to His awesome humility as one who, though God of very God and Messiah Himself, came in order to serve and to give his life a ransom. In other words, He came to serve in order to set men free to be the people God had created them to be.

Since in this passage the Lord was correcting the thinking of His disciples, this clearly illustrates how we need to spend time with Him in His Word that we might allow His life and the teaching of Scripture to transform our thinking and thus our sources of trust, aspirations, and actions.

When the other disciples got wind of the request of the two, they became indignant and a certain degree of division occurred among the disciples. This shows how longing and striving for position, power, and praise quickly ruins relationships in the body of Christ and creates disunity and division. Servant living does the opposite.

Principle: the purpose of serving others is to set them free to love and serve God, not to make them our servants or to serve our wants or needs. We are all responsible to serve one another, but never in order to be served or to satisfy our immature cravings.

MATTHEW 23:11-12

23:11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 23:12 And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

Greatness in God’s kingdom is never to be found in position or power or in the praise and opinions of men, but in servant-like service to others.

We see again that one of the greatest hindrances to service or servant living is the desire for some form of exaltation—position, praise, prestige, and power. Those who take the secular route so typical of the world and who exalt themselves will eventually be humbled. They will not only eventually lose the very status they seek, but if they are believers, they will also lose rewards in the kingdom.

Following the statement of verses 11-12, the Lord began to pronounce woes on the Pharisees who typically longed for status and praise. These woes illustrate some of the consequences when men fail to live as servants.

LUKE 22:24-30

22:24 A dispute also started among them over which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. 22:25 So Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ 22:26 But it must not be like that with you! Instead the one who is greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the one who serves. 22:27 For who is greater, the one who is seated at the table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

22:28 “You are the ones who have remained with me in my trials. 22:29 Thus I grant to you a kingdom, just as my Father granted to me, 22:30 that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

The setting here is that of the Passover and the institution of the Lord’s Supper, both of which spoke of Christ in His person and work as the suffering servant who would die for our sin. This scene presents a graphic picture of how preoccupation with self-centered interests (position, praise, and acceptance by others) ruins our capacity to even properly worship and relate to the person and work of the Savior. Because they were seeking their happiness and significance by trying to manage their own affairs they were blinded to what He was seeking to teach them and to what His life meant to them.

Servant living will be rewarded in the future. One of the hindrances to servant living is man’s impatience and his desire to be served now! Therefore, one of the keys to effective service is faith and constant orientation with the weight of eternity (2 Cor. 4:15-18). When we seek our reward now through the praise of men as did the Pharisees, we lose the power of God on our lives and ministries and we lose rewards in the future (cf. Matt. 6:1-4). But why do we do that? In unbelief, we turn from resting in God’s wisdom to our own foolishness through which we seek to handle life by our own plans or machinations.

JOHN 13:1-5 AND 12-17

13:1 Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. He had loved his own who were in the world, and now he loved them to the very end. 13:2 The evening meal was in progress, and the devil had already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon’s son, that he should betray Jesus. 13:3 Jesus, because he knew that the Father had handed things over to him, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 13:4 got up from the meal, removed his outer clothes, took a towel and tied it around himself. 13:5 He poured water into the washbasin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to dry them with the towel he had wrapped around himself. . .

13:12 So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? 13:13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 13:14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 13:15 For I have given you an example: you should do just as I have done for you. 13:16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 13:17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Perhaps no passage illustrates the source and nature of the heart of a servant more than John 13. Here, in the upper room on the night before His crucifixion the Lord Jesus dramatically drove home the issue and nature of what it means to be a servant. Imagine the scene. All had been prepared for this last meal with the disciples with the exception of one thing. According to the custom of the day a servant, with a basin of water and towel in hand, would wash the feet of the guests who had walked down the dirty, dusty roads of Palestine. But who would take the position of this servant and perform the task? I can just see the disciples looking around expecting someone else to do this, but never for a moment considering it himself. Then out of the blue, as a perfect picture and lesson of servanthood, the Lord Jesus rose to the task, laid aside His outer garment, put a towel around his waist, took water in a basin and began washing the feet of the disciples, all of which was a fitting analogy of yielding His privileges and assuming the role of a slave.

First, we should note that the source of Jesus’ actions lay in His knowledge and security of who He was and where He was going (vss. 1-3). Jesus was completely aware of His sovereign authority, His origin, and coming destiny as He submitted and depended by faith in what the Father was doing (cf. vv. 1, 18). Thus, in that confidence, He voluntarily took the place of a slave and washed the feet of His disciples. His thinking and action contrasts sharply with the self-seeking insecurity of the disciples, none of whom were willing to pick up the towel and take the place of a servant (cf. Matt. 20:20-24; Mark 9:33-34; Luke 22:24-30).

Christ’s security, His love, and His confidence in the Father and future allowed the Lord Jesus to assume the position of a servant, an amazing example of condescension (vss. 4-6). This attitude, faith, and action portrayed His entire ministry on earth (cf. Phil. 2:5-8) and provides us with the perfect example of what He wants to do in our lives. But this also demonstrates how servant living is accomplished in us—through faith and understanding of who we are in Christ and by confidence in the eternal glories of the future. After Jesus finished washing the feet of the disciples, He returned to His place and made this very pointed application:

John 13:12-15 So when Jesus had washed their feet and put his outer clothing back on, he took his place at the table again and said to them, “Do you understand what I have done for you? 13 You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and do so correctly, for that is what I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you too ought to wash one another’s feet. 15 For I have given you an example: you should do just as I have done for you.

Having pointed to His actions as an example for them, Christ then drove home an inescapable lesson, here defined as a “solemn truth.” If He, their master and the One they worshipped, assumed the role of a servant to minister to others, then certainly they must likewise take the towel of servanthood as a minister to others rather than seek to elevate themselves. Ironically, and contrary to the thinking of the world, true blessing comes in serving others.

16 I tell you the solemn truth, the slave is not greater than his master, nor is the one who is sent as a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 If you understand these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

PHILIPPIANS 2:1-8

2:1 If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort provided by love, any fellowship in the Spirit, any affection or mercy, 2:2 complete my joy and be of the same mind, by having the same love, being united in spirit, and having one purpose. 2:3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 2:4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well. 2:5 You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had, 2:6 who though he existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God

as something to be grasped, 2:7 but emptied himself by taking on the form of a slave, by looking like other men, and by sharing in human nature. 2:8 He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!

This classic passage on the humiliation of Christ (verses 5-8) is here set forth as the supreme example for unselfish servant living for Christians. The apostle presents the Lord Jesus as One who, in his supreme superiority, manifests what is the model for all Christians; it points us to the humility needed to live as servants of others. Though existing in the form of God with all the rights and prerogatives of deity, Christ Jesus emptied Himself by taking on the form of a slave, by becoming true humanity. Christ veiled His deity and voluntarily laid aside the right to use and manifest His divine prerogatives in submission to the Father. In doing this, He humbled Himself that He might die even the death of the cross.

But the focus we dare not miss is Paul’s statement in verse 1 and the implications drawn from this. The main verb of the passage is “complete my joy.” Seeing men and women come to Christ in faith gives joy, but as one devoted to seeing believers mature into Christ-like living (see Col. 1:28; Eph. 4:13), nothing could give Paul greater joy (vs. 2) than to see believers live unselfishly serving one another with the mature mind of Christ (vss. 2-5). But before the apostle says “complete my joy,” he begins by getting the Philippians to think through what was theirs in Christ by the work of God. Literally, the text begins with four “if” clauses. He wrote, “If there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort by love, if any fellowship in the Spirit, if any affection and mercy…” In Greek, these are first class conditional clauses, which, for the sake of argument or for a response from the reader, assumes the statement to be true. It is what can be called the response condition. Paul was not questioning the reality of these blessings in Christ. Rather, he used the first class condition as a kind of rhetorical device to get the reader to think through the issue and respond properly. The point is there is encouragement, comfort by love, and fellowship in the ministry and power of the Spirit, and the result—compassion and mercy that all believers should have for others.45 But we must never turn such blessings into merely personal comfort. The goal and result must be servant living, living as expressed especially in verses 3-5:

2:3 Instead of being motivated by selfish ambition or vanity, each of you should, in humility, be moved to treat one another as more important than yourself. 2:4 Each of you should be concerned not only about your own interests, but the interests of others as well. 2:5 You should have the same attitude toward one another that Christ Jesus had.

The fundamental issue in living as servants, as those committed to meeting the needs of others, is a deep down humility that is willing to pick up the servant’s towel regardless of one’s status or station in life. No matter what one’s station or condition in life, whether king or peasant, slave or free, rich or poor, strong or weak, brilliant or slow of mind, nobleman or common, etc., in Christ God calls all Christians to live as servants serving others with the Lord Jesus as the perfect example of One who, though God of very God, took upon Himself “the form of a servant.”

… When Jesus Christ came into the world, it was not to come into a wealthy man’s home where all material things might be His. The home was characterized by poverty. He did not come into a royal home so that He might be respected as heir apparent even though He has the right to rule this earth. He was not born in Caesar’s home so that in due course He might follow His father to the throne. His station in life was that of a servant. A servant is characterized not so much as a person to be despised, but as someone without rights; a servant submits himself to the will of his master. What Paul emphasizes is that, when Jesus Christ came into the world, He came as One who had no rights of His own. The One who had all the rights that belonged to the eternal Son of God gave up the exercise of these rights; He came into the world as a servant who has no rights but is subject to the authority of another.46

The real test of whether we are truly maturing and learning to become a Christ-like servant is how we act when people treat us like one.

Concerns to Consider

In seeking to develop a servant’s heart, Christians naturally face the opposing forces of the world, the flesh, and the devil, all of which are directed toward promoting selfish concerns and especially the pursuit of significance. Even when engaged in religious or humanitarian works, selfish pursuits can so easily come to the surface. While there are undoubtedly many reasons for this, two fundamental concerns come to mind that I would like to address.

(1) People too often serve others from their own neurotic need for approval or for significance. The Christian community generally understands they are to live as servants, but our preoccupation with our own significance robs us of the ability to serve. Part of the problem is that in our society today such a selfish pursuit is no longer seen as a neurosis or as a disorder. In fact, it is not only seen as natural, but it is presented as a legitimate need and something everyone should pursue. It is more important today that children feel good about themselves than learn their ABCs. But the problem is that the world is searching for significance in all the wrong places and by all the wrong means. A search for significance as it is promoted by the world naturally produces the opposite of servanthood. It produces extreme selfishness and aberrant behavior.

People today often wear themselves out, overtly demonstrating the Christian model while inwardly they are actually serving in order to feel better about themselves or to gain position, praise, acceptance, etc. Again, such behavior stems from the worldly model that operates by a different world viewpoint. As a result, many people serve in various capacities in the church from a host of false agendas. Significantly, after the exhortation of Romans 12:1-8, which include service to others, the apostle warns, “Let love be without hypocrisy” (12:9).

If we are not extremely careful and constantly check our motives, we can fool ourselves. We can be engaged in all kinds of service while actually serving our own neurotic needs—desires for acceptance or feelings of significance or for control or for praise, position, power, and prestige. We can serve to feel important rather than because we love people and the Lord and because we are resting in who we are in Christ, complete in Him.

(2) We need to identify and work toward serving the real needs of others and not their neurotic wants. We live in a self-centered society that wants comfort and happiness. It is also a society that wants to be served by others. We might compare the many who followed Christ. There were curious followers and even convinced followers, but some were following from the wrong motives: some followed for political reasons thinking Jesus would remove the yoke of Rome. Others followed for food (John 6:15f). Regardless, the Lord regularly challenged these impure motives.

This false mentality manifests itself in the church in a number of ways. For instance, consider the reason many, if not most churches today, hire a pastor or a pastoral staff. The biblical reason, of course, should be to be equipped for ministry. As Ephesians 4:11ff shows, the leadership of the church has been given the mandate to equip the saints for the work of ministry—servant living. But churches far too often hire pastors to be their ministers, not to equip them for ministry. They want leaders who will serve them and make their lives comfortable. But this is contrary to the servant principle of Scripture and the biblical goal of leaders which is to help their people develop into true mature Christ-like believers. Leaders and disciples alike must recognize that having the wrong goal (making the flock happy and comfortable) ultimately leads to misery, not true happiness.

“Many of us place top priority not on becoming Christ-like in the middle of our problems but on finding happiness. I want to be happy but the paradoxical truth is that I will never be happy if I am concerned primarily with becoming happy. My overriding goal must be in every circumstance to respond biblically, to put the Lord first, to seek to behave as he would want me to. The wonderful truth is that as we devote all our energies to the task of becoming what Christ wants us to be, He fills us with joy unspeakable and a peace far surpassing what the world offers…” etc.47

Why is servanthood so important to the Christian life and to Christian ministry? Well, just consider the very negative consequences of selfish service as seen in woes pronounced on the Pharisees in Matthew 23:13f. Further, a self-serving kind of lifestyle is not only contradictory to the life, death, and message of the Savior, but it engenders division in the body of Christ. Service that is at self-serving simply cannot hold up under the pressures of the ministry and the large doses of criticism that often go with the territory. Eventually this kind of self-seeking service will crumble under criticism because it is more concerned about self and one’s personal significance than with the needs of others. In fact, if we fail to find our significance in the Savior, we will become obsessed with gaining recognition. This obsession will often lead to burnout—to anger, bitterness, and a heart that is poisoned against ministry.

Conditions that Hinder Servanthood

What are some of the hindrances to developing a servanthood mentality. As you consider the following, think about your own life and natural tendencies.

(1) The desire for status or to feel important is a tremendous barrier to biblical servanthood. This is very evident in the reluctance of the disciples to take the towel and the position of a servant as seen in John 13. But we need to understand this aspiration for status actually stems from a failure to rest in one’s significance in the Savior. When Christians fail to rest in who they are in Christ, they will constantly be battling the need for importance or significance from within their own desires and felt needs. Further, this need will be constantly inflamed by the influences of a world system that operates on a totally different basis. We think that happiness will come when we are treated in a certain way, but that’s just not the case for there will always be those who do not treat us like we want to be treated.

(2) Human strategies to meet one’s own felt needs pose another hindrance to servant living. Everyone faces the problem of meeting their felt needs by their own solutions and defense and escape mechanisms (i.e., the things people do to protect their self image or how they want to people to feel about them). Rather, our need and responsibility is to trust the Lord for our acceptance, ability, production, and strength. Based on biblical values and truth, we must, by faith and an act of our will, firmly reject the goal of seeking to serve our own needs and adopt the goal of becoming servants of others like the Lord.

(3) A poor concept of one’s self-worth, along with a faulty source for developing our self-worth, forms another hindrance to effective servanthood. As mentioned, people often seek their self-worth from the opinions of people rather than by the value God places on their lives according to His Word.

(4) Self-centered living or seeking happiness from the world rather than in the Savior and His purpose and call on one’s life is another cause for failing to live as servants. This naturally results in a lack of commitment and in wrong priorities and pursuits which will leave little or no time for the Lord or ministry to others and the body of Christ.

Consequences in the Absence of Servanthood

What, then, are some of the consequences of a lack of servanthood in the body of Christ?

(1) The opposite of a servant’s heart is self-seeking, which leads to consequences like jealousy, envy, disunity and division. This is most evident in the actions of the disciples (see again Luke 22:24-30). Paul’s exhortation and teaching in Philippians 2 is centered around the call for harmony among the Philippians where there was evidently some disharmony (see 1:27; 2:2).

Leonard Bernstein, the celebrated orchestra conductor, was once asked, “What is the hardest instrument to play?” Without a moment’s hesitation he replied, “Second fiddle. I can always get plenty of first violinists. But to find one who plays second violin with as much enthusiasm, or second French horn, or second flute, now that’s a problem! And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony.”48

(2) Failure to get involved in ministry. As was evident in the disciples’ behavior in John 13, the absence of a servant’s heart causes people to simply sit back while expecting others to serve them. This is what can be called the “layman mentality,” a condition that occurs when congregations hire the minister to minister to them. The attitude is, we are here to be ministered to rather than be equipped for ministry.

(3) Burnout in those who are ministering. This can be caused by exhaustion simple because a few people are attempting to do all the work. Or, as mentioned above, burnout can occur because of the pressure and hurt brought on to a large degree by self-serving motives for acceptance, etc.

(4) The church fails to accomplish what it has been called to do in evangelism and all the aspects of edification because of a lack of ministering people. One of the clear goals of Ephesians 4:12ff in the equipping of the saints for ministry is the involvement of the whole body in ministry according to the gifts and abilities of the saints. In fact, this is a mark of maturity. Speaking of the goal of equipping the saints into mature servants, the apostle Paul said,

4:14 The purpose of this is to no longer be children, tossed back and forth by waves and carried about by every wind of teaching by the trickery of people who with craftiness carry out their deceitful schemes. 4:15 But practicing the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the head. 4:16 From him the whole body grows, fitted and held together through every supporting ligament. As each one does its part, the body grows in love. (emphasis mine)

(5) The absence of a servant’s heart leads to playing power games or spiritual king of the mountain. This naturally leads to bitterness, contention, and division in the body of Christ. Again, let it be stressed that Jesus’ style of ministry is the opposite of the world’s power-based mentality where certain kinds of accomplishment are viewed as a badge of importance and power. Christian love means putting the other person first, seeking the other person’s well being regardless of what it costs us, even if we are called on to play second fiddle.

(6) The absence of a servant’s heart is really the absence of humility or pride. As Scripture so plainly declares, the leads to the loss of the power of God on one’s ministry. “In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. And all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet. 5:5). Pride or the absence of humility quenches the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:13-26).

(7) Inability to lead others in the things of Christ because of one’s own self-seeking hypocrisy (Matt. 23:13f).

In view of these consequences, an important question that needs to be asked is simply, “Do I have the heart of a servant?” If I think I do, then, “In what ways is it demonstrated in my life?”

Thoughts on Developing the Heart of a Servant

So just how can I develop the heart of a servant that will lead to genuine growth in selfless, servant living? Though certainly not exhaustive, the following thoughts I trust will be helpful in this regard.

Learning to live as a servant naturally begins by following the Lord Jesus. As believers who are to follow in the steps of our Savior, it is important that we focus on Him because He was and is the epitome of humility, maturity, and leadership. That which most uniquely characterized Him was servanthood. Even now, though seated at the right hand of the Father as the glorified Lord, He continues to minister to us as our Advocate and Intercessor and Head of the body of Christ. This is tremendously significant especially in light of who He was and is. With this in mind, let’s review the following truth.

(1) Though being God of very God, He humbled Himself by becoming true humanity and was found in the form of a bond servant (Phil. 2:5-8) and God highly exalted Him (vs. 9). The road to successful leadership is paved with the solid concrete of humble service for others. Even in the Old Testament, which anticipates the glories of Messiah’s kingdom, Messiah is seen as a “suffering servant.”

(2) If we are really following the Lord, we will be seeking to serve men. If we are not seeking to serve others from pure motives, then we aren’t following the Lord, at least not closely. Christ told His disciples, whom He wanted to follow in His steps, “the Son of man did not come to be served but to serve,” and in another place He said, “…I am among you as one who serves” (Mark 10:45; Luke 22:27).

(3) In the supreme act of service as our Great High Priest, Christ offered Himself on the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world and remains seated as our Advocate before God. Knowing and being confident of His identity (John 13:1f), knowing why He was on earth as the servant who must die for our sin, focusing of the rewards of the future, and acting out of a heart of infinite love, Christ washed the feet of the disciples. This was a symbol of the service He continues to perform for us in the daily cleansing of our sins even though He is the risen and exalted Lord.

Engstrom writes,

His kind of service set an example.… Thus He showed His followers how to serve, and He demanded no less of those who would carry on His work on earth. Jesus teaches all leaders for all time that greatness is not found in rank or position but in service (italics his). He makes it clear that true leadership is grounded in love which must issue in service.”49

(4) Another truth vital to developing a servant’s heart is facing the reality of our own weakness and need. No one in their own energy has the ability to give themselves sacrificially as a servant according to the example of the Savior. For this we need the transforming ministry and enablement of the Holy Spirit and the renewing direction, grace, and strength that comes from living and growing in the Word. Thus, a Word-filled (Col. 3:16), Spirit-filled (controlled) life (Eph. 5:18) is an absolute essential to the ability to give ourselves as servants.

(5) Two more companion elements to living as servants are surrender and sacrifice as are found in the exhortation of Romans 12:1-2. The self-serving spirit and mind-set of the world is opposed to the mind of sacrificial servant living. Thus, based on the mercies of God available to believers in Christ, the apostle appeals to Christians to surrender themselves to God as living sacrifices. Essential to that, and in keeping with living a Spirit-controlled and Word-filled life, is the need for daily renewing the mind in the truth of the Word.

Romans 12:1 Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service. 12:2 Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

Such surrender and sacrifice naturally forms the foundation and well spring for servant living, which is clearly God’s will for all Christians. Paul immediately, therefore, points his readers to their responsibilities in Christian ministry (Rom. 12:3-8). The point is that one’s consecration to God and a lifestyle transformed by the renewing of the mind is to be demonstrated in giving of oneself through the exercise of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Again, in the realm of surrender and sacrifice, the Lord Jesus is our perfect example. First, being willing to sacrifice His position and privileges, He surrendered Himself to the Father’s will. This also meant he was willing to serve and even suffer to fulfill the Father’s plan of salvation for us. Therefore, as He was willing to sacrifice and surrender that He might serve our needs (become our Redeemer and Advocate), so we are to be willing to serve, surrender, and sacrifice to meet the needs of others as a display of the mind of Christ (Phil 2:3-5). For the Christian, then, this means (a) knowing the Word which identifies the true needs of people and then (b) working in the power of the Spirit to meet those needs according to our gifts, opportunities, and abilities (see Acts 6:1-6; Col. 1:27-2:1). It also means caring about people and getting to know them personally so we can help meet their particular needs as we are given opportunity, as we have ability to do so, and as the Lord provides a way to do so.

(6) Another important element in developing the heart of a servant is learning to rest and find our significance in who we are in Christ. In Him we are complete (Col. 2:10) and blessed with every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3). What could be more significant than being called a child of God, a title that applies to all believers in Christ.

1 John 3:1-3 (See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called God’s children—and indeed we are! For this reason the world does not know us: because it did not know him. 3:2 Dear friends, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. But we know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him, because we will see him just as he is. 3:3 And everyone who has this hope focused on him purifies himself, just as Jesus is pure).

The Christian’s need, then, is to seek his sense of well being and happiness from his identity in Christ and not from people or from position. Otherwise, even if he does render service, it will often be from a self-serving motive like acceptance or praise (see John 13:1; Rom. 12:3; Eph. 1:6; Col. 3:3-4). Man’s obsessive pursuit of significance produces thinking and behavior that runs counter to the values and behavior that are consistent with Christ-like servant living. It invariably leads to defensive and protective behavior patterns that put self above others.50

(7) Finally, another important element in living as servants is living according to the perspective of eternity, having eternal goals and values. If this was true with the Lord Jesus, and it was, then it must also be so with us (see again John 13:1f; and Heb. 12:1-3). This means learning to live as pilgrims, as those who are living in view of the Judgment Seat (Bema) of Christ and His “well done, thou good and faithful servant” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:15-18; 10:10-18; with 1 Cor. 4:1-5).

Principle: Following the example of the Savior, believers are to function as servants who seek to minister to one another in loving and selfless service.

Issue: Am I, in submission to the Lord and to others, seeking to serve, or am I seeking to be served in the pursuit of my wants?

Conclusion

Seeking to promote servant living, the apostle reminds us in Philippians 2:1 that there is encouragement in Christ, a comfort provided by love, fellowship in the Spirit, and affection and mercy. I believe that the first three, encouragement in Christ, a comfort provided by love, and fellowship in the Spirit are what come to us through our walk with the Savior—they are the products of fellowship. The last two, affection and mercy, may refer to the results of Christ in us as it is to be expressed to others in selfless concern. In other words, as the God of peace and the God of all comfort, He wants us to have His peace and He wants to comfort us, but He is more concerned about our character as expressed in servant living than our comfort. His ultimate goal is not to pamper us physically or emotionally, but to perfect us spiritually, conforming us into the character of the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus gave Himself redemptively for us to restore us to God and create a people who would live as servants of God in the service of others proclaiming the good news and loving others for Him. Thus, as Christ gave Himself, so God wants us to give ourselves for others.

In his book, The Quest for Character, and in a chapter entitled, “The Gift that Lives On,” Swindoll’s words form a fitting conclusion to this study:

In our pocket of society where pampered affluence is rampant, we are often at a loss to know what kind of gifts to buy our friends and loved ones on special occasions. For some people (especially those who “have everything”) the standard type gift won’t cut it. Nothing in the shopping mall catches our fancy.

I have a suggestion. It may not seem that expensive or sound very novel, but believe me, it works every time. It’s one of those gifts that has great value but no price tag. It can’t be lost nor will it ever be forgotten. No problem with size either. It fits all shapes, any age, and every personality. This ideal gift is … yourself. In your quest for character, don’t forget the value of unselfishness.

That’s right, give some of yourself away.

Give an hour of your time to someone who needs you. Give a note of encouragement to someone who is down. Give a hug of affirmation to someone in your family. Give a visit of mercy to someone who is laid aside. Give a meal you prepared to someone who is sick. Give a word of compassion to someone who just lost a mate. Give a deed of kindness to someone who is slow and easily overlooked. Jesus taught: “…to the extent that you did to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).51

Session 9

1. What is the definition of servanthood?

2. How can servanthood be selfish?

3. What are the two options regarding servanthood that Jesus gives us in Matthew 20:20-28?

4. In Luke 22:24-30, what do we learn about our preoccupation with self-centered interests?

5. What is the result of our impatience and our desire to be served now?

6. How does Jesus model servanthood in John 13:1-5 and 12-17?

7. What is Paul’s warning to us in Philippians 2:3-5?

8. In developing a servant’s heart, what two concerns might stand in our way?

9. What does the search for personal significance produce?

10. If we are not constantly checking our motives for serving, what might our results be?

11. What happens if we do not find our significance in Christ?

12. Please list the four conditions that hinder servanthood?

13. What are the seven consequences of the absence of servanthood? Be specific.

14. According to Philippians 2:5-8, why did God the Father exalt His Son, Jesus?

15. In developing a servant’s heart, what reality must we face and how do we deal with it?

16. In what areas are you serving the Body of Christ?

17. What drew you to serve in these areas?

18. Describe the feelings you experience when serving in these areas?

19. What motivates you to continue serving?

20. What kind of praise do you receive from others for the service you perform?

21. How does praise make you feel?

22. Would you continue to serve in an area where your work was not recognized? Why?

23. List the areas of your life in which you are served?

24. How do you react when others fail to serve you in these areas?

25. How does servanthood play a role in your position as:

Spouse:

Parent:

Leader:

Employee/employer:

26. What must you do, beginning today, to acquire an authentic heart of a servant?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Following the example of the Savior, believers are to function as servants who seek to minister to one another in loving and selfless service. Are you, in submission to the Lord and to others, seeking to serve, or are you seeking to be served in the pursuit of your wants?

NPS Bible Study Lesson 2

MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #9: Surrender and Self-Sacrifice

Introduction

As mentioned in the last study and as seen in the life of Christ, servanthood is ultimately the outcome of one who, having first surrendered himself to God, is able to give himself sacrificially for God and others. This element of surrender is seen in the single-minded devotion of the Jesus who came to do the will of the One who sent Him and to complete His work (John 4:34). But Christ’s single-minded devotion or commitment to the will of the Father was the result of the surrender of His life and will to the Father’s agenda. Such surrender meant giving Himself sacrificially for our redemption in keeping with the Father’s plan (John 3:16).

Thus, as qualities that characterized the Lord Jesus, surrender and self-sacrifice form two more vital marks of spiritual maturity. These two qualities, however, are here treated together because they are so related as cause and effect or root and fruit. Further, because they are so much a part of the character of Christ and true maturity, they deserve special mention in any list of qualities of spiritual maturity and leadership.

Surrender

The first step (the root) is surrender. To surrender means to relinquish possession or control to another, to submit to the power, authority, and control of another. The entire New Testament, as summarized in Philippians 2:6-8, shows us that Christ was willing to surrender His rights and prerogatives as the second person of the Trinity to the will and purpose and plan of the Father. Then, out of that surrender came the willingness to sacrifice for God’s plan no matter what the plan called for. Surrender, then, is part of the pathway to maturity and effective Christ-like ministry.

Surrendering to God’s agenda in and through us requires a clear view of the agendas we have prescribed for ourselves. Most people’s lists of things they consider important would include personal peace, happiness, comfort, prosperity, security, friends, good health, fulfilling experiences, and reaching their full potential.

The above list should make the need for our surrender obvious, for those plans often conflict or ignore God’s plan for us. It’s true that God may and often does provide for us measures of peace, prosperity, position, fulfillment, and other things on our lists, but our surrender to God’s plan is a statement that we will not live for these things (emphasis mine). They are not the things that drive us, but are simply side benefits that come through the sovereign pleasure of God.

Let’s never forget the great benefit to God’s glory and kingdom that has come through the lives of thousands of people who have surrendered to agendas beyond their own. Some have gone to faraway lands as missionaries. Mothers have surrendered careers and opportunities for significance to teach their children God’s truth. Fathers have changed careers or turned down promotions that conflicted with God’s will for them or their families. Pastors have faithfully served in out-of-the-way places where no one knows their names or asks them to speak at high-profile conferences.52

Sacrifice

The next step (the fruit) that follows surrendering to the God is sacrifice. The aspect of sacrifice is emphasized in Philippians 2:6-8 by the words, “He humbled himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross!” Surrendering to the Father’s will, He emptied Himself, became man and was found in the form of a servant whereby the Lord Jesus willingly gave Himself sacrificially that God’s will might be fulfilled in and though His life and death. While this involves the mystery of His incarnation and stands far beyond our comprehension, several levels of sacrifice are evident in the Savior’s surrender that set the perfect example for us. His sacrifices actually began when He emptied himself of His privileges and the prerogatives that were His as the second person of the Trinity. In becoming man, He veiled and laid aside the voluntary use and glory of His many attributes as God the Son. Then, in this life on earth, He did without wealth, position, status, and even acceptance in that He was rejected by His own (John 1:11). Unlike the foxes that have their dens and the birds their nests, the Son of Man had no place to lay His head (Matt. 8:20). Ultimately, of course, He made the greatest sacrifice of all in that He who knew no sin became sin for us by dying the ugly and horrible death of the cross—a sentence reserved for the worst of criminals.

The bottom line is this: Christ voluntarily emptied Himself of anything and everything that stood in the way of the glory and gain of His Father through Him.

What about us? Although rights, privileges, pleasures, possessions, expectations, and well-formed plans may not be wrong in and of themselves, are we willing to hold them loosely and even let them go—to sacrifice them—if emptying ourselves of them will enable us to fulfill God’s agenda for our lives?…

Surrendering to God’s agenda may mean sacrificing our children—or our goods, reputation, comfort, convenience, and a whole list of other things we hold so tightly in our hands as well as those things we hope and plan for.53

By sacrificing our children, Stowell was referring to the willingness of parents to give up their children in the sense of seeing them go into some form of full-time service like foreign missions or even some other type of career ministry, something many parents would not consider “solid, stable, and a real job.”

I can well remember when I made the decision to attend Dallas Theological Seminary. I had been raised on a small cattle ranch in East Texas and had a degree in animal husbandry from Texas A&M University. Through my experience on the ranch and my studies at A&M, I was fairly well prepared to manage a cattle ranch. After graduation, I was offered an excellent job working for a large feed company in our area while managing a large ranch. But God had also been at work in my heart and I had become convinced that God’s will for my life was to prepare for the pastorate (shepherding sheep rather than herding cattle) through attending seminary.

My father thought I had lost my mind! He claimed I would be wasting my life, my education at Texas A&M, and did his best to dissuade me. He was almost ashamed of the fact I would be going to seminary rather than taking a job in the market place. Ironically, I was also offered a position with a pharmaceutical company in the Pacific Northwest, and this would have been okay in my dad’s eyes because this job was with a well-know company and came with an excellent compensation package. I would not have been using my training in cattle and pasture management, but that didn’t seem to matter. Though his attitude changed before I finished seminary and my dad became very supportive, at first, before God had worked in his heart, my dad was simply not willing to see his son go into full-time ministry. To him this was a sacrifice he was not readily willing to make.

Conclusion and Application

In your own words, what are some of the principles and imperatives the following passages teach about self-sacrifice as one of the marks of spiritual maturity needed in the Christian life? See Matthew 6:19ff; 10:37-38; 19:29; 16:24; Luke 9:23; 1 Cor. 9:15-23; Rom. 12:1ff; 14:1-15:3; 1 Cor. 8:13; 2 Cor. 4:7-18.

Based on scriptural principles, what are some of the guiding factors and motivations or reasons for the necessity of self-sacrifice in the Christian’s life?

The following are offered as a few principles and challenges drawn from the above listed passages:

(1) The “therefore” in Romans 12:1 shows the call to surrender ourselves as living sacrifices is predicated on the reality of the “mercies of God” described in chapters 1-11. These first eleven chapters of Romans instruct us in God’s plan for sinful man through the saving life and death of Jesus Christ. In other words, in view of all that God has done and is doing for us in Christ, it is illogical for the Christian to do anything else but give his life back in devoted surrender and sacrifice to God.

(2) What a person does with his life depends on the clarity of his vision as to what is truly valuable and lasting. As Jesus made so indelibly clear in the metaphors of Matthew 6:19-24, a man’s heart (his aspiration, desires, pursuits) depends on his treasure, and what he treasures depends on his perspective or insight to life according to biblical and eternal values versus worldly and temporal values. Thus, holding tightly to God’s kingdom values determine priorities which in turn will determine one’s objectives and pursuits—what one is willing to surrender to and sacrifice for. Therefore, one who holds tightly to God’s kingdom values (because of time, testimony, ability, or influence) may often have to say no to many things, even many good things, because they will get in the way of those goals that are based on biblical values and priorities. This is the issue of pursuing what is excellent or best over against what is simply good (see Phil. 1:9f).

One of the obvious qualities of spiritual maturity and leadership so completely possessed by our Lord was His willingness to make sacrifices in accordance with His values, priorities, and objectives as One who was totally surrendered to the will and plan of the Father. This always included surrendering to the Father’s will first, and then the blessing and well-being of others, but neither of these can exist without sacrifices, without counting the costs.

(3) Self-sacrifice means putting the Lord first above self and even family (see Matt. 10:37; 19:29). Without this, no one is free to follow Him and properly influence others for Christ. Sacrifice means “taking up one’s cross” regardless of the cost (Matt. 10:38; 16:24; Luke 9:23). Taking up one’s cross, according to the culture of the day, was an act of submission, a willingness to pay the price and do whatever God asks. Historically and culturally, the analogy of “taking up one’s cross” meant to cease rebelling against the King’s rule and submit to His rule over one’s life.54 In practical terms for the Christian, it means dying to one’s own desires and will in total submission to God to be, go, and do whatever He calls one to do.

One of my wife’s sisters and her husband served for many years in South Africa as missionaries. They then served their mission board here in the states for the past eleven or twelve years. They are now in their fifties, have two married daughters, and are about to be grandparents, yet, they believe God has led them to go to a foreign ministry where Christians are often persecuted, where the weather is hot and humid, and the living conditions anything but ideal by U.S. standards. Because of their faith and surrender to the Savior, they are willing to sacrifice their comforts in the States and seeing their precious little grandchildren grow up. This is a decision that has been extremely painful, but a sacrifice they are willing to make for the Savior and for the lost.

Their sacrifice and that of many others like them reminds me of something a missionary society in South Africa once wrote to David Livingstone, “Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to send other men to join you.” Livingstone replied, “If you have men who will come ONLY if they know there is a good road, I don’t want them.” Livingstone knew that such men would not last when the going really got tough. They simply could not make the needed sacrifices.

Reflecting on your own life, what are some of the things the Lord may be calling on you to sacrifice or give up in order to fulfill His will and purpose or to minister to someone in need? Though the apostle had liberty in Christ to eat meat or to receive financial compensation for his labor in the gospel, he was willing to sacrifice those rights for the glory of God and the spiritual well being of other. Following the declaration of his willingness to so sacrifice (1 Cor. 8:13-9:18), Paul made this statement,

1 Corinthians 9:19-22 For since I am free from all I can make myself a slave to all, in order to gain even more. 20 To the Jews I became like a Jew to gain the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) to gain those under the law. 21 To those free from the law I became like one free from the law (though I am not free from God’s law but under the law of Christ) to gain those free from the law. 22 To the weak I became weak in order to gain the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that by all means I may save some. 23 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it.

Though we have great liberty in Christ and all things are lawful, having been freed from the bondage of the Law (see 1 Cor. 8:9; 10:23), all things are not profitable or beneficial for the building up of others or even for one’s own spiritual growth. Thus, seeking to glorify God, the biblical position of sacrificial living is seen in the following statement by Paul:

1 Corinthians 10:23-24 “Everything is lawful,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is lawful,” but not everything builds others up. 24 Do not seek your own good, but the good of the other person.

For a moment, think about the statement, “Others may, but spiritually mature people who want to have an impact for Christ often cannot afford to.” Though something may not in itself be wrong, it becomes wrong for a believer if it gets in the way of his or her ability to serve and accomplish the will of God. It was not wrong for Paul to receive funds from those to whom he carried the gospel, but in order to show that his motives were pure, he willingly sacrificed that right lest receiving compensation for his work might hinder the impact of his testimony.

Principle: Paying the price through dying to self or self-sacrifice means the power or liberty to make right choices in submission as a servant to God and others.

The issue is, am I willing to deny myself or pay the price so that I am free to follow the Lord and become the person God has saved me and called me to be? Whether one is willing to accept it or not, there is another kind of price tag for those who, for whatever reason, are unwilling to give of themselves for others. No one ever said it better than C. S. Lewis:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.… The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love…is Hell.

Session 10

1. What is the definition of surrender?

2. Why are the marks of surrender and self-sacrifice being discussed together?

3. According to Philippians 2:5-8, how did Jesus Christ demonstrate the act of surrendering?

4. How would you describe your condition of surrender to the will, purpose, and plan of God?

5. What areas of your life have you surrendered to God?

6. Which ones are you still holding onto?

7. Why is it difficult for you to release them?

8. What would it mean for you to “empty yourself” in your act of total surrender to God?

9. Why is sacrifice the “fruit” of surrender?

10. Referring to Philippians 2:5-8, when did Jesus begin His sacrificial life?

11. In what other areas of His life did Jesus make sacrifices?

12. Why do you think He made these additional sacrifices before making His ultimate sacrifice on the cross?

13. In your own words, what are some of the principles and imperatives the following passages teach about self-sacrifice as one of the marks of spiritual maturity needed in the Christian life? (Matthew 6:19ff; 10:37-38; 19:29; 16:24; Luke 9:23; 1 Corinthians 9:15-23; Romans 12:1ff; 14:1-15:3; 1 Corinthians 8:13; 2 Corinthians 4:7-18).

14. Based on scriptural principles, what are some of the guiding factors and motivations or reasons for the necessity of self-sacrifice in the Christian’s life?

15. Describe how you live sacrificially in:

Your home:

Your church:

Your workplace:

Your community:

16. Reflecting on your own life, what are some of the things the Lord may be calling on you to sacrifice or give up in order to fulfill His will and purpose or to minister to someone in need?

17. What in your life would be most difficult to sacrifice?

GROUP DISCUSSION

Paying the price through dying to self or self-sacrifice means the power or liberty to make right choices in submission as a servant to God and others.

Are you willing to deny yourself or pay the price so that you are free to follow the Lord and become the person God has saved you and called you to be?

NPS Bible Study Lesson 3

 MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #10: Self-Control

Introduction

In a department store a young husband was minding the baby while his wife was making a purchase. The infant was wailing, but the father seemed quite controlled and unperturbed as he quietly said, “Easy now, Albert, control your temper.” A woman passing by remarked, “Sir, I must congratulate you! You seem to know just how to speak to a baby.” “Baby nothing!” came the reply. “MY name is Albert!”

The mention of the term self-control undoubtedly brings to mind different images for people depending on their particular circumstances. Many probably think of combating dominating habits that can range from the simple to the more complex and debilitating. It may be as simple as a poor diet or a tendency to overeat at Thanksgiving, or to talking too much. It may also be something far more serious like chain smoking, drunkenness, drug abuse, sexual sins (pornography and adultery), a quick temper, a pattern of exaggerating or lying, etc. Others may think of dealing with an abusive spouse, parent, or employer or of dealing with their own tendencies toward losing control and becoming abusive. Others need self-control because they are lazy or have poor work habits while others are workaholics and need self-control to back off and learn to relax.

Regardless, self-control is very much an important part of maturity. One of the basic characteristics of infancy is a lack of self-control. Not only do babies need diapers, they must be carried because they lack the necessary control and muscle coordination to sit up much less walk or run. If a babies are healthy and normal, in time they will develop more and more self-control—a sure sign of growth and maturity.

The importance of self-control can be seen in the news media which graphically portray how the lack of self-control, because of man’s various inner cravings, impact our society for evil. Plainly, when men and nations turn away from God and seek significance, security, and satisfaction through the desires of the flesh, it leads to a blatant absence of self-control. This will then manifests itself in hundreds of ways with devastating results on individuals, families, on certain groups in a society (the fatherless, the widow, and the poor [see Isa. 1:21-23]), and on society as a whole.

In the early chapters of Isaiah, the prophet pronounces judgment on the nation of Israel because, having turned away from the Lord and His Word, the nation was completely lacking in self-control—a condition that also affected the leadership. Thus, Isaiah speaks of the results of this among the leaders—an effect that naturally spills over into the rest of society.

Isaiah 3:4-5 And I will make mere lads their princes And capricious children will rule over them, And the people will be oppressed, Each one by another, and each one by his neighbor; The youth will storm against the elder, And the inferior against the honorable.

Isaiah sternly warned them that the objects of their trust, their leaders who were traditionally respected because of their maturity and discretion (self-control), i.e., “the old,” “the honorable,” would be replaced by those who were totally inadequate and incapable of leading the nation. Why? Because they were immature, unwise; indeed, they would be like mere lads, capricious children. The word “capricious” refers to one who acts according to impulse or whim. It’s a perfect word for one who lacks self-restraint or wise discretion. How pertinent to our society today! The headlines during the present administration, because of Bill Clinton’s capricious behavior or lack of control in the matter of his sex life, provide a sad commentary on the way the absence of self-control negatively affects a society. With what has now come to light, the same can be said of other presidents like John F. Kennedy.

The first mention of the term self-control in the New Testament (Acts 24:25) provides another illustration of what happens in society when there is a lack of self-control. The text reads,

24:24 Some days later, when Felix arrived with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus.24:25 While Paul was discussing righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix became frightened and said, “Go away for now, and when I have an opportunity, I will send for you.”

Drucilla, the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I and sister of Agrippa II, would have been close to 20 years old at the time. She had married the king of a small region in Syria but divorced him at the age of 16 to marry Felix. This was not only her second marriage, but it was third marriage for Felix (Josephus, Antiquities 19.354; 20.141-44). Thus, the topic of self-control was entirely appropriate in view of the personal history of both Felix and Drusilla and was probably the reason for his anxiety. In addition, his administration was marked by injustices that contrasted with the righteousness and justice of God. His unrighteousness and lack of self-control not only made him a poor example to those whom he governed, but affected his ability to govern justly.

As has been so blatantly seen in our own government and in the White House, what a person is in private will eventually have a negative impact on his public life and service. For this reason and because of the issue of duplicity or spiritual hypocrisy, self-control is one of the qualifications called for in church leaders (see 1 Tim. 3:2). The principle is simply that he who would lead or govern or properly influence others for good, must first be the master of himself. As Peter reminds us, “For whatever a person succumbs to (i.e., is controlled by), to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

Samson, a man raised up by the Lord as a deliverer and judge over rebellious Israel, is another case in point. Samson strangled a lion; yet he could not strangle his own love. He burst the fetters of his foes; but not the cords of his own lusts. He burned the crops of others, and lost the fruit of his own virtue when burning with the flame kindled by a single woman.56

Since the absence of self-control can have such devastating results, it is naturally needed in every area of life and for all people. Unfortunately, the desire for self-control may have many motivations. It may stem from man’s self-centered or worldly objectives rather than from inner controls brought about by a deep relationship with God and biblical beliefs, motives, values, methods and means, and objectives. When and where such belief structures are absent, the absence of self-control in other areas will be just around the corner.

In our society where so much emphasis is placed on one’s physical appearance, many exercise extreme self-control to maintain a beautiful appearance, but exercise little self-control when it comes to moral issues such as sexual fidelity or honesty in business. For self-control to branch out into every compartment of one’s life, one needs the spiritual dynamics of a deep relationship with the living God as seen in such passages as 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12. Just a casual reading of this passage dramatically demonstrates how faith in Christ, biblical instruction, and the reality of God’s activity, including His discipline on those who disobey, is to transform all avenues of a Christian’s life. This is contrasted with lustful passions of an unbelieving world that does not know God.

4:1 Finally then, brothers and sisters, we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received instruction from us about how you must live and please God (as you are in fact living) that you do so more and more. 4:2 For you know what commands we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 4:3 For this is God’s will: for you to become holy, for you to keep away from sexual immorality, 4:4 for each of you to know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, 4:5 not in lustful passion like the Gentiles who do not know God. 4:6 In this matter no one should violate the rights of his brother or take advantage of him, because the Lord is the avenger in all these cases, as we also told you earlier and warned you solemnly. 4:7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 4:8 Consequently the one who rejects this is not rejecting human authority but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.

4:9 Now on the topic of brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another. 4:10 And indeed you are practicing it toward all the brothers and sisters in all of Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more,4:11 and to aspire to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, as we commanded you. 4:12 In this way you will live a decent life before outsiders and not be in need.

It should be noted that our true spiritual condition is to be measured first and foremost by the inner person, the heart, and not by the external person, the habits. Why? Because habits or overt behavior are the product of the condition of the heart.

Mark 7:14-23 Then he called the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand.7:15 There is nothing outside of a person that is able to make him unclean by going into him. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that makes him unclean.”

17 Now when Jesus had left the crowd and entered the house, his disciples asked him about the parable. 18 He said to them, “Are you so foolish? Don’t you see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot make him unclean? 19 For it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and then goes out into the sewer.” (This means all foods are clean.) 20 He said, “What comes out of a person makes him unclean. 21 For from within, out of the human heart, comes evil ideas, immorality, theft, murder, 22 adultery, greed, evil, deceit, debauchery, envy, slander, pride, and folly. 23 All these evils come from within and make a person unclean.”

Definition and Explanation

Fundamentally, self-control is the ability or power to rule or regulate one’s personal life so that we are neither driven nor dominated, as the apostle John puts it, by the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, or the pride of life (1 John 2:16; see also Gal. 5:19-21). These three, passion, pleasure, and pride, are those forces in the heart of man that energize his behavior patterns. It is to these inner forces that Satan and a fallen world appeal in order to promote a way of life that seeks to exist apart from God. The essence of such self-regulation is the ability to delay or refuse an impulse in the service of biblical truth, values, beliefs, and objectives.

Self-control means to be in control of one’s attitudes or thought processes, desires or passions, and patterns or habits so they do not dictate one’s behavior.

Speaking scripturally, self-control is a matter of the control of the self-life from within by spiritual means, i.e., by God’s weapons of spiritual warfare as described in the Word of God (2 Cor. 10:3-5; Eph. 6:10-18; Col. 2:20-23).

Key Terms for Self-control in the New Testament

Just as we have a number of synonyms in English for self-control like temperate, sober, self-restraint, self-discipline, reign over, or self-mastery, so too there are several terms used in the New Testament to express self-control as a whole or a particular aspect of it. In 1 Timothy 3:2-3 several forms of self-restraint or discipline are mentioned. “The overseer then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, 3:3 not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not contentious, free from the love of money.” Of the twelve qualities mentioned, all but two deal with a specific application of some form of self-control. The focus here will be on the more general terms.

THE ENKRATEIA GROUP

The first word group comes from the Greek noun kratos, “strength, power, might,” plus the preposition en, “in, on, at, with” or when in composition with other words, it may suggest, “possession of the quality of the word with which it is attached. In this case, “self-mastery, control.” This word group consist of the noun enkrateia, “self-control, mastery of one’s appetites and passions,” the adjective, enkrates, “self-controlled, disciplined,” and the verb enkrateuomai, “to control oneself, be disciplined, abstain from something.” These words are used in Acts 24:25; 1 Corinthians 7:9; 9:24-27; Galatians 5:23; 2 Peter 1:6; and Titus 1:8.

H. Baltensweiler, makes an interesting comment regarding this word group.

Discipline is a concept that plays a significant part in the philosophical ethics of classical Greece and also in Hellenism. It is striking that the word-groups discussed here are relatively rarely attested in the New Testament. The life of man in the Bible is determined not so much by self-control in the sense of an autonomous ethic as by commandments of God.57

As mentioned previously, in Scripture, self-control is to be the product of one’s faith relationship with God and not a matter of self-righteous self-denial or asceticism. This is most obvious in Galatians 5:23 where it is seen as one part of the fruit (singular) of the Spirit.

THE SOPHRONISMOS GROUP

The second word group are all derivatives of the Greek term sophos, “wisdom, wise.” They consist of (1) the verb sophroneo, “be of sound mind, be reasonable, sensible, keep one’s head,” and from this, “be self-controlled” (Tit. 2:6; 1 Pet. 4:7),58 (2) the nouns sophronismos, “good judgment, the teaching of morality, moderation, self-discipline” (1 Tim. 1:7) and sophrosune, “mental soundness, reasonableness, good judgment, moderation, self-control” (1 Tim. 2:9, 15), (3) the adverb sophronos, “soberly, moderately, showing self-control” (Tit. 2:12), and (4) the adjective sophron, “prudent, thoughtful, self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; 2:2, 5). As should be evident, all these words contain the idea of self-control through discretion or mental soundness.

THE NEPHO GROUP

A third important word group is nepho and nephalios. The verb nepho basically means “be sober.” In the New Testament, however, it is only used figuratively in the sense of “be free from every form of mental and spiritual drunkenness.” In 1 Peter 1:13, Peter wrote, “Therefore, get your minds ready for action, by being fully sober, and set your hope completely…” The verb means, “free from excess, passion, rashness, confusion, i.e., be well-balanced, self-controlled, be self-possessed under all circumstances (2 Tim. 4:5; 1 Pet. 4:7; 5:8). Rather than allowing outside circumstances to influence their inner lives, believers should be controlled and directed by the inward spiritual dynamics of their new life in Christ for both now and in the future. The noun form is nephalios, “sober, clear headed, temperate, self-controlled” (1 Tim. 3:2, 11; Tit. 2:2).

TERMS RELATING TO THE IDEAS OF RULE AND MASTERY

In view of both the inward (the cravings of the flesh) and external stimuli (the worldly appeals and temptations from without), it is easy for people to develop life-dominating patterns that literally rule or have mastery over their lives. In the New Testament, two more significant and related terms come into play. These are basileuo, “to reign, have control over, rule” and kurieuo, “to be master over, rule over.” These word are used in Romans 6:12-14 where, based on the Christian’s identification with Christ in His death and resurrection by the baptizing work of the Spirit, the apostle Paul exhorts believers have rule over the appetites of the flesh.

Romans 6:12-14 Therefore do not let sin reign ( basileuo) in your mortal body so that you obey its desires, 13 and do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who are alive from the dead and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. 14 For sin will have no mastery over ( kurieuo) you, because you are not under law but under grace.

OTHER TERMS OF SIGNIFICANCE

While the above terms deal specifically with the concepts of control, restraint, rule, and self-mastery, there are many other terms that should perhaps be mentioned because they are related to self-control in some manner, often as cause and effect or root and fruit. These include terms like abstain (1 Pet. 2:11), obey or obedience (Rom. 6:16; 2 Cor. 10:5), submit or be subject (1 Pet. 2:13; 3:1), keep or maintain good conduct (1 Pet. 2:12), lay aside and put on (Eph. 4:22f). In essence, any command for obedience to God or conduct that is in keeping with biblical Christianity or godliness is really a call for inward controls by the grace and provision of God found for us in Christ.

For instance, when insulted or treated in an unfair or evil manner, the natural and sinful impulse is to react in some form of retaliation—insult for insult, evil for evil. But God calls upon us to control such impulses by turning the situations over to Him through the application of biblical truth and faith. The following passage from 1 Peter illustrates this for us in two passages:

1 Peter 1:21-25 2:18 Slaves, be subject to your masters with all reverence, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the perverse. 2:19 For this finds God’s favor, if because of conscience toward God someone endures hardships in suffering unjustly. 2:20 For what credit is it if you sin and are mistreated and endure it? But if you do good and suffer and so endure, this finds favor with God.2:21 For to this you were called, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving an example for you to follow in his steps. 2:22 He committed no sin nor was deceit found in his mouth.2:23 When he was maligned, he did not answer back; when he suffered, he threatened no retaliation, but committed himself to God who judges justly. 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we may leave sin behind and live for righteousness. By his wounds you were healed.2:25 For you were going astray like sheep but now you have turned back to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

1 Peter 3:8-12. Finally, all of you be harmonious, sympathetic, affectionate, compassionate, and humble. 3:9 Do not return evil for evil or insult for insult, but instead bless others because you were called to inherit a blessing. 3:10 For the one who wants to love life and see good days must keep his tongue from evil and his lips from uttering deceit. 3:11 And He must turn away from evil and do good; he must seek peace and pursue it. 3:12 For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears are open to their prayer. But the Lord’s face is against those who do evil.

The essence of self-control, then, is the growing manifestation of the holy qualities and character of the Lord Jesus as Christians seek to exchange their lives, which were formerly dominated by the cravings of the old life, with the new and glorious life of Christ. The means for this is a Word-filled and Spirit-filled59 life (Col. 3:17; Eph. 5:18).

The Forces Within and the Issue of Control

Below the surface of our lives are certain forces at work, which, if not controlled, can suddenly erupt causing various degrees of damage, depending on the nature and build-up of the pressure. Similarly, earthquakes occur when a build-up of pressure between sections of rocks within the earth’s crust is suddenly released, causing minor or severe vibrations on the surface of the land. The point at which layers of rock shift and reposition in relation to one another is called the focus; this is the energetic center of the earthquake. Directly above the focus, a second point called the epicenter marks the corresponding point of highest-intensity shock on the surface. Shock waves propagate like ripples from the focus and epicenter, decreasing in intensity as they travel outward.60 Unfortunately, though scientists sometimes can discern the presence of problems and predict the probability of earthquakes, there is nothing they can do to prevent the shifting of the plates of the earth.

The Bible not only points to the presence of inner pressures at work below the surface, but emphatically predicts the problem of constant eruptions in the heart of man. This is spoken of as “doing the will of the flesh and of the mind” according to the cravings of the flesh, a condition that is the result of being dead in sin and by nature, the children of wrath (Eph. 2:1-3). This struggle is spoken of as a continuous struggle in the heart of man. It is an on-going problem that results in misery, defeat and domination (see Rom. 6:12-14; 7:13f; Gal. 5:16; 1 John 2:16).

Unlike earthquakes over which we have no control, people (especially Christians) can have control over the pressures that exist below the surface of their lives. If no control was available, then we might excuse a lack of self-control with the often-heard excuse, “That’s just the way I am.” Such an excuse implies we are not truly responsible for our actions.

The cause of this underlying struggle is spoken of by a number of New Testament terms as outlined below.

THE PROBLEM OF INDWELLING SIN

The term sin is sometimes used by the apostle Paul as a power or force or energy within the heart of man that seeks to rule or control (see Romans 6 and 7).

THE PROBLEM OF LUSTS OR INTENSE DESIRES OF THE FLESH

Another term used by Paul is the lusts or intense desires of the flesh. In this case, flesh refers to that sinful propensity in all of us to attempt to handle life (find happiness, significance, security, etc.) by our own resources apart from God. In Ephesians 2:1-3 and again in 4:16-19, Paul gives us a graphic picture of the unregenerate condition of man under the domination of the flesh. Being dead in sin and without God, man is ruled by the desires or cravings of the flesh.

Ephesians 2:1-3 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest…

Ephesians 4:17-19 So I say this, and insist in the Lord, that you no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their thinking. 18 They are darkened in their understanding, being alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardness of their hearts. 19 Because they are callous, they have given themselves over to indecency for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.

THE PROBLEM OF WORLDLY DESIRES

In Titus 2:12, Paul spoke of these inner forces as “worldly desires.” “Desires” is epithumia, “desire, passionate longing.” Though sometimes translated “lusts,” this word in itself is neutral. Desire or passionate longing is not in itself evil. It is the context that determines the nature of the desire. Thus, the apostle qualifies it here with the adjective “worldly.” “Worldly” is kosmikos, which carries the idea of “pertaining to or deriving its standards, values, and motivations from the kosmos, the world system. This is a reference to the organized system in the world that operates under the deception and power of Satan and stands opposed to God and His kingdom, values, and purposes. The significance of this can be seen if we compare kosmikos with pneumatikos, a derivative of pneuma, spirit. Pneumatikos means “activated or controlled by the Spirit.” It speaks of a life patterned or controlled or directed by God’s Spirit rather than by the flesh ( sarkikos) or by the world ( kosmikos).

THE DISTORTION OF PASSION, PLEASURE, PRIDE

In 1 John 2:16, the apostle John described and divided these internal forces into three powerful energies of the inner man or the heart: “the lusts of the flesh,” passion, intense desire, “the lusts of the eyes,” pleasure, and “the boastful pride (arrogance) of life, pride. But again, the problem is not with the presence of passion, pleasure, or even pride which are all God-given, but with their misuse and function within the human heart. The issue is one of management and the objectives involved in their use. This is even true with pride (see Jer. 23:24; Rom. 5:11 [rejoice or boast, take pride in verbally]; 2 Cor. 12:5-7).

THE PRIMARY ISSUE IN SELF-CONTROL

Sometimes the secular and religious world recognize the need of some form of self-restraint to bring the appetites of the flesh under control. This often takes the form of human practices like asceticism (extreme forms of self-denial believing the ascetic life releases the soul from bondage to the flesh) or legalism (keeping a set of human taboos or do’s and don’ts and observing certain ritualistic practices in the vain belief that such is an evidence one has his appetites under control). In essence, no matter what the form (asceticism or legalism or religionism) they all involve the flesh trying to overcome the flesh.

I remember reading about a monk who, while attempting to mortify himself from fleshly indulgences would lie prostrate on the floor for hours on end all the while proudly entertaining the thought of how good and above average he was because of his self-denial. The Lord Jesus Himself warned the religious Pharisees in Mark 7:15: “There is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him; but the things which proceed out of the man are what defile the man.”

Thus, the apostle Paul, recognizing such practices are futile to man’s problem and faithless in the completed work and provision of God in Christ, wrote:

Colossians 2:20-23 If you have died with Christ to the elemental spirits of the world, why as though you lived in the world do you submit to them? 2:21 “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!” 2:22 These are all destined to perish with use, founded as they are on human commands and teachings.2:23 They have the appearance of wisdom with their self-imposed worship and false humility, by an unsparing treatment of the body, but they are thoroughly useless when it comes to restraining the indulgences of the flesh.

The issue in self-control from a biblical standpoint is never a matter of (1) denying the legitimacy of passion, pleasure, or pride, or (2) despising these God-given energies, or (3) seeking to obliterate them by some form of self denial. Rather, the issue is their spiritual management, control, and direction by the truth of Scripture, by spiritual union with Christ, and by the enablement of the Spirit. In pointing to the fundamental issue of the way man distorts these energies within, Augustine wrote:

Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition and try desperately to fulfill it without God. Not only is it sin, it is a perverse distortion of the image of the Creator in us. All these good things, and all our security are rightly found only and completely in Him.61

This is why covetousness or greed, extreme desire for something, is identified as a form of “idolatry” in Scripture (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Greed or covetousness treats the thing coveted (possession, position, praise, pleasure, etc.) as though is has the capacity to do what only God can do.

But even when exercising some degree of self-restraint, Scripture teaches us that the unbelieving world and the carnal Christian live under the domination of the cravings of the flesh (Eph. 2:1-3; 4:16-20). The reason is simply because at the root of the restraint other cravings will be operative as seen in the illustration of the proud monk. Search hard and honestly and one will always find certain selfish or self-centered reasons for the controls that are exercised. An actress or an athlete may exercise extreme self-control or discipline, but the objective is usually for some form of personal glory or prize that is coveted (see 1 Cor. 9:24-25). In other words, some form of worldly craving is really at the core of such self-discipline. Of course, Christians are also not exempt from exercising self-control from the same kinds of selfish motivations. If we were, we would never find admonitions that warn us against worldly behavior like those in Titus 2:11-12 or Ephesians 4:17-21.

Regardless, self-control or its absence is never merely the product of chance or of conditions beyond one’s control for the believer in Christ. Rather, it is the product of certain spiritual dynamics at work through one’s thinking processes involving belief structures, biblical insight, values, priorities, and objectives. Of the terms used in the New Testament for self-control, one such word group ( sophron, sophroneo, sophronos, etc.) suggests this very idea. Sophron, for instance, means “prudence, discretion, thoughtful,” and then “self-controlled.” Sophrosune means (1) “reasonableness, rationality, mental soundness,” or (2) “good judgment, moderation, self-control.” This word group in the New Testament teaches us that self-control is brought about through good judgment, sound thinking or the thinking processes. Though the motives and sources of control should be different for believers, such a dynamic process can be observed in anyone—an athlete, actor, student, or a professional of any kind—who competes or strives for earthly rewards or objectives. Speaking of the sacrifices he was willing to make and the self-restraint he was willing to undergo for the sake of the gospel, the apostle Paul likened his behavior to the dynamic processes that motivated athletes who performed in the stadium:

1 Corinthians 9:23-27 I do all these things because of the gospel, so that I can be a participant in it. 24 Do you not know that all the runners in a stadium compete, but only one receives the prize? So run to win. 25 Each competitor must exercise self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. 26 So I do not run uncertainly or box like one who hits only air. 27 Instead I subdue my body and make it my slave, so that after preaching to others I myself will not be disqualified.

Ultimately, then, the issue is the self-management of the motivations that direct and control these inward dynamic processes. This leads to a consideration of a key problem that is important in the issue of biblical self-control that is in keeping with the power and kingdom of God.

THE PROBLEM OF THE PURSUIT OF SIGNIFICANCE

In the fourth mark of maturity, the concept of developing a biblical self-image was discussed. A biblical self-image is derived not from the values others or we ourselves place on us. Rather it is derived from the values and estimation that God places on us not only as His creation—created in the image of God—but especially as Christians who have become new creatures and the children of God in Christ through regeneration by the Spirit. Especially in the writings of the epistles, there is a great emphasis placed on the awesome contrast between what we were and have become as regenerated children of God. The following passages should help us focus on the point:

A NEW LIFE INDIVIDUALLY

Ephesians 2:1-10 And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2:2 in which you formerly lived according to this world’s present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, 2:3 among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest…

2:4 But God, being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, 2:5 even though we were dead in transgressions, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you are saved!— 2:6 and he raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, 2:7 to demonstrate in the coming ages the surpassing wealth of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. 2:8 For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; 2:9 it is not of works, so that no one can boast.2:10 For we are his workmanship, having been created in Christ Jesus for good works that God prepared beforehand so we may do them.

A NEW LIFE CORPORATELY

Ephesians 2:11-22 Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh—who are called “uncircumcision” by the so-called “circumcision” that is performed in the body by hands—2:12 that you were at that time without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. 2:13 But now in Christ Jesus you who used to be far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.2:14 For he is our peace, the one who turned both groups into one and who destroyed the middle wall of partition, the hostility, in his flesh, 2:15 when he nullified the law of commandments in decrees. The purpose of this was to create in himself the two into one new man, thus making peace, 2:16 and to reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by which the hostility has been killed.2:17 And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; 2:18 so that through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. 2:19 So then you are no longer foreigners and non-citizens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household, 2:20 because you have been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. 2:21 In him the whole building, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 2:22 in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.

A NEW INHERITANCE AND KINGDOM

Colossian 1:12-14 giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light. 1:13 He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of the Son he loves,1:14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

FROM ENMITY TO AMNESTY

Colossians 1:21-23 And you were at one time strangers and enemies in your minds as expressed through your evil deeds, 1:22 but now he has reconciled you by his physical body through death to present you holy, without blemish, and blameless before him—1:23 if indeed you remain firm in the faith, without shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard. This gospel has also been preached in all creation under heaven, and I, Paul, have become its servant.

FROM CONDEMNATION TO JUSTIFICATION AND GLORIFICATION

Romans 5:1-11 Therefore, since we have been declared righteous by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,5:2 through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God’s glory.5:3 Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance;5:4 and endurance, character; and character, hope.5:5 And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

5:6 For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 5:7 (For rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person perhaps someone might possibly dare to die.)5:8 But God demonstrates his own love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 5:9 Much more then because we have now been declared righteous by his blood, we will be saved through him from God’s wrath.5:10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, how much more, since we have been reconciled, will we be saved by his life? 5:11 Not only this, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received this reconciliation.

CHILDREN OF GOD WITH A LIVING HOPE

1 Peter 1:3-6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he gave us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 1:4 that is, into an inheritance imperishable, undefiled, and unfading. It is reserved in heaven for you, 1:5 who by God’s power are protected through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 1:6 This brings you great joy, although you may have to suffer for a short time in various trials.

1 John 3:1 See what sort of love the Father has given to us: that we should be called God’s children—and indeed we are!

It is from this marvelous change and translation by the grace of God, not by any merit of our own, that we are to derive our self-image and from which we are to gain our sense of significance, value, and self-worth as the children of the living God. As His children, as those who are kept by the very power of God, we have an eternal, imperishable, undefiled, and unfading inheritance. Believing that man is not only the creation of God, but understanding man’s unique place in the creative work of God, the Westminster Shorter Catechism rightly concludes that “man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

Twice in Psalm 8, once at the beginning (vs. 1) and again at the end (vs. 9), the psalmist gives two emphatic exclamations on the glory and majesty of God. Verse 1, “O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth, You have set your glory above the heavens.” Then in verse 9 he again exclaims, “O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!” With this focus on the majesty of God, he then goes on, in verse 2, to exclaim a vital truth—that this majestic and sovereign Lord has chosen to use mankind, even children and the weak, to confound the strong and His adversaries. This is quickly followed by an exclamation pondering the thought that God has entrusted His glorious creation to the dominion of man (vss. 3-8). The wonder is that the God of creation chose to give weak man, created lower than the angels, such dominion, responsibility, and honor over His creation. Man has great significance and purpose, but only because of the design of the Creator. Thus the Psalmist exclaimed:

Psalm 8:3-8 When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, 4 what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? 5 You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: 7 all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, 8 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

Man has significance and purpose, but that significance is found in the purpose of his creation, which is to bring glory to God and serve Him. With this fact and truth in mind, why are we so consumed with glorifying ourselves and seeking enjoyment apart from the Creator? The answer is found in the problem of the fall and the disruption this caused in man’s relationship with God and in the reign of Satan as the god of this age who seeks to distort all the purposes of God. Though the fall of Genesis 3 spoiled and delayed man’s capacity to carry out God’s purpose as intended, that purpose is recovered through the God-man Savior, the Lord Jesus (see Heb. 2:5-18; Rev. 4:1-5:10). It is with this distortion that we find both the cause for man’s obsession with his own significance and the reason he often finds life so disappointing, disruptive, and ultimately full of regret and futility. Fortunately, for the believer, this can be changed through the redemptive reconciliation and restoration in Christ.

Writing about man’s obsession with significance and the problems this causes, Stowell, in his excellent and thought-provoking book, Perilous Pursuits, Our Obsession With Significance, writes: “We are built for significance. Our problem is not that we search for it, but that we search for it in all the wrong places…”

True significance is never secured through our efforts or by our status or recognition or from the applause of men or by the attention and affirmation of others. Instead, true significance is founded and secured for us through the finished work of Christ on the cross. Even with this being true, we somehow feel compelled to magnify ourselves or seek to be magnified by others in search of significance through the various methods or human strategies man attempts to use. These include people’s incessant scramble up the proverbial ladder for position, power, praise, applause, recognition, possessions, etc. Ironically, like broken cisterns that hold no water (Jer. 2:13), such things never satisfy our cravings for significance no matter how much we have of the things we seek? Because the source is wrong and contrary to our intended purpose by God who created us, the craving for more will always exist whether it’s power or praise or money.

None of us is exempt from this significance pursuit, to the point where the pursuit often become a significance obsession. Our problem is that we look for significance in all the wrong places. We pursue prosperity, power, position, belonging, identity, and affirmation in hopes of finally securing a sense of value and worth.

To make matters worse, this pursuit is complicated by three basic drives: pleasure, pride, and passion.

In other words, and this is the point with regard to self-control, man’s obsession with significance forms a tremendous obstacle to self-control and the joyous life and rest God wants us to have in Christ. Actually, the pursuit of significance, like a match in a dry forest, fuels passion, pleasure, and pride. In our quest for significance, our fundamental and God-given desires are fanned into a blazing flame or action. Believing that a BMW, a mansion with a view, or one’s name in lights will give status or prominence in the community, we desire more and more, and bigger and better. Because we were created for significance, we are all inherently driven by a compelling need to believe that we are significant to some degree. As R. C Sproul says, “We are driven to believe that in some way we are important. This inner drive is as intense as our need for water and oxygen.”

…Just as obsession with food leads to gluttony and an obsession with safety leads to anxiety and even neuroses, an obsession with our significance leads to a life of selfishness.

In psychologist Abraham Maslow’s classic study of fundamental human needs, only food and safety rank as more compelling drives than significance. These intrinsic needs manage and manipulate who we are and what we do. Just as hunger drives us to find and consume food to survive, and just as we instinctively defend ourselves when we feel threatened, so we are driven as well to discover, establish, maintain, protect, and enhance our sense of significance.

Feeling significant comes as we believe we have worth, value, and dignity. Significance is knowing that our existence has made a difference after all. It doesn’t have to be a great difference, just a difference. Significance is what makes a pat on the back so important. It’s why affirmation is so vital. We believe we count when someone says we count. Having value and dignity are important, but depending on how we seek them, we can be deluded and consumed by the search.

The search is risky because we live in a world full of other significance seekers who either carelessly or purposely are willing to damage our sense of worth to establish theirs. These people are often fierce competitors who get their significance through the exercise of power and control, who attempt to build the illusion that they are so significant that others will submit to their pleasure and agenda.

These significance seekers attempt to overpower us personally, relationally, sexually, socially, and athletically, and in the process they may very well destroy our sense of worth. Complicating the scene are those of us who find our sense of significance in the attention of these power brokers and as a result become easy prey. There is not a realm of life that isn’t damaged, sometimes fatally and irretrievably, by the significance seekers of the world in which we live.65

So again, we can see the sad effect of this pursuit on one’s ability to experience self-control. Stowell continues,

…Our compulsion for significance makes us vulnerable to a legion of verbal sins, including gossip, slander, boasting, lying, immoral chatter, and other unkind blows by our tongues. In all this our character, our personhood, is eroded. The significance addiction leaves us vulnerable to a host of other personal failures that complicate life and debilitate us spiritually and socially. It may surprise you to learn that many people have affairs not because they are drooling with uncontrolled passion, but because for the first time in their lives someone has come along and made them feel significant during a time when they especially needed it.

We are quick to violate basic principles of stewardship and burden ourselves with debt to accumulate things that enhance our significance on the social scene. And to advance our significance in the marketplace we may violate our integrity as we exchange conscience and commitment to Christ for a significant title on our business card.

Significance seekers are unable to serve others unless there is an advantage to be gained, unable to sacrifice to advance a cause that is not their own, unwilling to suffer if necessary for another’s sake, and unable to surrender to any agenda—corporate, family, or church—that impedes the progress of their pursuit of significance.…66

One of the key passages on self-control warns us about the ever present problem of what Paul refers to as “worldly desires,” desires inspired by a satanically-manipulated society. Speaking of “the grace of God that has appeared bringing salvation in Christ, he wrote: “It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age…” (Titus 2:12). Thus, avoiding society’s version of the pursuit of significance is not easy in a world system that is truly obsessed and driven by the pursuit of significance.

The constant refrain we hear is that those who are perceived as significant have arrived and are models of the ultimate pursuit of life. In our culture, significance is measured less by the contributions we make to society than by power, performance, position, and prosperity.

Look at the world of college and professional sports. The message is clear: winners are the only ones who count. There is little applause for finishing second. Character doesn’t win pennants…

Even more debilitating, our society cares little about the integrity or character of significant people or how they became significant. The point is to attain and maintain your significance. The process is irrelevant. Television talk shows specialize in staging and interviewing America’s “significant” ones…67

Obviously, such an obsessive pursuit creates a huge obstacle to authentic and biblical Christian living in which self-control is a vital part of Christ-like maturity. In the process and through the avenue of hypocrisy, such a pursuit distorts the very core of Christian living in that it turns it inward rather than outward in honest service for others. Remember Paul words, “let love be without hypocrisy.” We can be involved in all kinds of Christian ministry, but for selfish reasons for our own significance. Such an obsession with our own significance or importance negatively affects the body of Christ. Christians end up using their ministry in some way as a platform to gain some significance, even if just a little.

There are pastors who use the church as a platform to launch a personal significance campaign. They do battle with deacons, elders, and charter members who also want to use the church to enhance their power and position. The division and disruption that come as a result of these battles stain the reputation of Christ in the community.…

There are also those who proclaim that you can satisfy your longing for significance not in Christ and Him alone, but by coercing Him through “faith” to make you happy, healthy, and prosperous. There are televangelists who have preyed on the uninformed by appealing to their need for significance, making these people feel significant if they send money, which in turn enhances the significance of the charlatan preacher.

Still other dishonored the name of Christ by allowing their significance in His work to delude them into believing that they were above obedience when it came to money, women, and power. They have publicly taken the name of Christ through the trough of disgrace.68

Such behavior by the body of Christ is totally contrary and contradictory to authentic Christian living. True significance which gives Christ’s kind of peace and joy in the ups and downs of life is derived from an unshakable, day-by-day relationship with the Savior and one’s life in Him through resting in one’s perfect and complete position in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:3f; Col. 2:10 with 1 Cor. 4:1f). The apostle Paul is a wonderful illustration of this confidence as one who found his significance, security, and satisfaction through the Savior.

To Christians who were comparing one leader to another and criticizing the apostle, Paul found his significance not in their assessment of his life and ministry but in his relationship with the Lord and Jesus’ faithfulness to reward His saints.

1 Corinthians 4:1-5 People should think about us this way—as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 4:2 Now what is sought in stewards is that one be found faithful. 4:3 So for me, it is a minor matter that I am judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4:4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not acquitted because of this. The one who judges me is the Lord. 4:5 So then, do not judge anything before the time. Wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the motives of hearts. Then each will receive recognition from God.

Again, in the face of another time of opposition and criticism, we see an illustration of his spiritual maturity and stability:

1 Thessalonians 2:1-7 For you yourselves know, brothers and sisters, about our coming to you: it has not proven to be purposeless.2:2 But although we suffered earlier and were mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had the courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of much opposition. 2:3 For the appeal we make does not come from error or impurity or with deceit, 2:4 but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we declare it, not to please people but God, who examines our hearts. 2:5 For we never appeared with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed—God is our witness— 2:6 nor to seek glory from people, either from you or from others, 2:7 although we could have imposed our weight as apostles of Christ. But we were little children among you—like a nursing mother caring for her own children.

Thus, Paul was a picture of mature self control because he had learned that the secret of contentment was never in circumstances whether good or bad, whether in times of need or abundance, or whether praised by people or reproach by them.

Philippians 4:10-13 I have great joy in the Lord because now at last you have again expressed your concern for me (now I know you were concerned before but had no opportunity to do anything). 4:11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content in any circumstance. 4:12 I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. 4:13 I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me.4:14 Nevertheless, you did well to share with me in my trouble.

Biblical Motivations for Self-control

THE INSTRUCTIVE NATURE OF SALVATION BY GOD’S GRACE

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. 2:12 It trains us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 2:13 as we wait for the happy fulfillment of our hope in the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. 2:14 He gave himself for us to set us free from every kind of lawlessness and to purify for himself a people who are truly his, who are eager to do good.

When its full implications are recognized and grasped though spiritual growth, the message of God’s grace in Christ should lead Christians in a two-fold way. First, it should have a negative result in that it motivates Christians to say reject godless ways and worldly desires (see Heb. 11:24-26). Second, it should have a positive result in that it motivates Christians to live godly lives in the present age while living in the light of the imminent return of the Lord. All the specific instructions of Titus 2:1-10 fit into these two negative and positive categories.

THE BELIEVER’S LIVING HOPE AS REGENERATED CHILDREN OF GOD

1 Pet. 1:13 Therefore, get your minds ready for action, by being fully sober, and set your hope completely on the grace that will be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

With the “therefore”69 in verse 13, Peter based the exhortations in the following verses on the context of the previous doxology (vss. 3-9) and on the ministry of the Old Testament prophets along with the interest of angels (vss. 10-12). Typically, in the New Testament, “therefore” follows a doctrinal foundation and introduces various responsibilities that flow out of the previous truth. Again and again in the epistles we see the importance of doctrine which forms the basis, the means, the standard, and the motivation for Christian conduct.

In essence, verses 3-12 are about the certainty and character of the Christian’s future hope which Peter describes as an eternal inheritance that is everything our earthly inheritances are not. Peter describes this as “a living hope” wrought through the new birth and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Furthermore, this salvation was the object of concentrated study by the Old Testament prophets and the object of intense interest by the angels. Thus, being children of a Holy and righteous God and the recipients of such an awesome salvation forms strong biblical motivation for godly living which naturally includes self-control or living soberly in an intoxicated world. Since Peter directly relates this to the coming of the Savior or His revelation, this includes the motivations of the Judgment Seat of Christ (the Bema, the place of rewards or their loss [1 Cor. 3:12-14; 2 Cor. 5:9-10]) and the nature of the Christian’s rewards as imperishable, undefiled, and unfading (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3-4 with Matt. 6:19f). Included here is the majestic glory of the millennial and eternal future.

Therefore, Peter combines the reality of our future hope and the fact of our present relationship and calling as children of God as a powerful incentive for transformed living. This naturally includes sober self-control through relating one’s life by faith to the salvation that is ours in Christ (For another passage stressing the impact on sonship to behavior, see Ephesians 5:1f).

The believers’ living hope based on their new birth should lead to a lifestyle of holiness. Those chosen for new birth are also called to be holy. Peter exhorted his readers to prepare to meet the challenge of obedience by adopting a new mind-set. The price paid for a believer’s redemption calls for reverence and obedience. Obedience involves purifying oneself and practicing holy living, while offering spiritual sacrifices as a royal priest.70

The spiritual dynamics involved with self-control (the energetic working of biblical values, beliefs, and faith) is nowhere more evident than in this wonderful passage in 1 Peter, especially in the exhortations of verses 13. Verse 13 contains three responsibilities for Christians and second on the list is self-control or sober-minded living. In many translations, these are each translated as imperatives and of equal importance, but this somewhat misses the point of the Greek text. There is actually only one imperative, “hope completely.” The other two are participles which, though they may pick up the mood of the one imperative, they also function to point the reader to those responsibilities that support and prepare for a complete, undivided hope that is so vital to transformed and fruitful living. The following translation may help to illustrate the point of the Greek text,

1. having girded up the loins (prepared your minds for action),

2. staying sober, self-controlled,

3. completely hope for the grace to be brought to you…

As one thinks about the call for self-control or sobriety, it is important to recognize that the primary objective and responsibility is “set your hope completely.” But, the two participles do point us to definite responsibilities. These are not just divine suggestions. However, we should not lose sight of the fact they are in some way supportive or preparatory to the primary command. In other words, girding up or preparing the mind and being self-controlled are preparatory and foundational to one’s ability to fix his or her hope completely on the eternal verities of our salvation in Christ.

(1) “Get your minds ready for action,” (NET) or “Prepare your minds for action” (NIV) (vs. 13a). Literally, the text says, “having girded up,” or “gird up the loins of your mind.” Girding up the loins is a figure of speech drawn from the Middle Eastern practice of gathering up long robes around the waist to prepare for work or action like taking a long journey or doing battle or working in the field. Peter may have in mind

…Christ’s own words (see Luke 12:35); an image taken from the way in which the Israelites ate the Passover with the loose outer robe girded up about the waist with a girdle, as ready for a journey. Workmen, pilgrims, runners, wrestlers, and warriors (all of whom are types of the Christians), so gird themselves up, both to shorten the garment so as not to impede motion, and to gird up the body itself so as to be braced for action. The believer is to have his mind (mental powers) collected and always ready for Christ’s coming.71

“Get ready for action” translates the aorist participle, anazosamenoi, as an attendant circumstance participle72 that gets it imperatival mood from the main verb, the aorist imperative, elpisate, “hope.” But again, by the use of the participle, Peter is showing what is needed as a vital preparation for maintaining a complete hope, “getting the mind ready for action.” Like the Hebrews who girded up their loins to prepare for their journey out of Egypt and into the land (see Ex. 12:11), so we must be mentally and spiritually prepared to live as sojourners and aliens while on earth (see vv. 18ff; 2:9-12). There is an element of sequence here or preparation both in the figure used by Peter (girding the loins) and in the grammatical structure he employed.73

With life’s many variegated and often painful trials and temptations, maintaining an undivided hope in anticipation for the return of the Lord requires a conscious act of the will that involves biblical understanding. “Christians in conflict need a tough-minded holiness that is ready for action.”74 Practically speaking, this would necessitate whatever is needed in a Christian’s life to be prepared like, restoration to fellowship through honest to God confession of sin, prayer, and daily renewal in the Word.

(2) “Be self-controlled” (NIV) or “by being fully sober” (NET) (see 1 Pet. 4:7; 5:8; 1 Thess. 5:6, 8). As discussed previously, this word (the present participle nephontes from the verb nepho, “be sober,”) is used only figuratively in the New Testament. It means to be free from every form of mental and spiritual intoxication or excess, rashness, or confusion. While God has given us all things to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17), Christians must carefully guard against being intoxicated by outside circumstances and the allurements of the world as though they have the capacity to give what only God can give. By contrast, Christians should be controlled from within by the Spirit and the principles of a Word-filled life which overflow with the kind of behavior seen in Ephesians 5:18f and Colossians 3:16.

Colossians 3:16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and exhorting one another with all wisdom, singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, all with grace in your hearts to God.

If preparing the mind for action enables one to be ready to act as a sojourner, then maintaining a state of sober self-control is the mental condition that enables one to act wisely and with a clear vision for what is truly important. And there are other motivations for sober, self-controlled living. Later Peter will exhort his readers to be sober or self-controlled with a view to effective prayer (4:7) and for the purpose of standing against the activity of the devil who is constantly on the prowl (5:8).

Regardless of how verse 13 is taken grammatically, we can again see how the spiritual dynamics of one’s life (the interplay of one’s beliefs, values, and vision for life) play a vital role in the issue of self-control or sober, Christ-oriented living.

(3) “Set your hope fully” (NIV) or “set your hope completely” (NET). With this imperative, we come to the primary emphasis and responsibility of Peter’s exhortations. By way of word order and thus emphasis, the Greek text has, “completely hope…” “Completely” is the adverb teleios, “fully, perfectly, completely, altogether, unreservedly.” It is a call for an undivided, single-minded hope, a confident expectation that lives daily in view of the return of the Lord and the eternal realities promised in Scripture that accompany salvation. Though Peter has already spoken of the Savior’s return and the accompanying ultimate stage of salvation (vss. 5, 7, 9), he now speaks of it literally as “the grace that is being brought to you.” First, he speaks of this ultimate salvation by the wonderful expression, “the grace.” Peter could have spoken of this as the salvation or inheritance or future glory, but by the term, “the grace” he not only speaks of all that God has done for us, but reminds us that no aspect of our salvation, past, present, or future is ever earned. It is the gift of God, freely given and this applies even to the rewards that are given for faithfulness. Why? Because is it only God’s grace that enables us to serve faithfully. Second, “brought” is a present adjectival participle which describes our future salvation as so certain that it is viewed as already on the way.

The impact of keeping our hope fixed undividedly and unreservedly on our behavior is beautifully illustrated in the life and death of Jim Elliot. Jim, who gave his life to take the gospel to the Aucas in the Amazon jungle, put it succinctly and perfectly when he said, “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Here was a man who brought the energies of his inner man—his passion, pleasure, and pride under control because of his confidence in the power of the gospel and the future glories that were more real to him than the present sufferings of life (see 2 Cor. 4:7-18).

THE DEVASTATING CONSEQUENCES OF A LACK OF SELF-CONTROL

Another motivation for self-control that must never be ignored involves the law of the harvest. Simply put, we reap according to what we sow. There are always consequences to our behavior. To ignore this truth is to be deceived or extremely foolish. Paul states the principle succinctly:

Galatians 6:7-9 Do not be deceived. God will not be made a fool. For a person will reap what he sows, 8 because the person who sows to his own flesh will reap corruption from the flesh, but the one who sows to the Spirit will reap eternal life from the Spirit. 9 So we must not grow weary in doing good, for in due time we will reap, if we do not give up.

There is a great subtlety here. Remember that the term subtle refers to that which is so slight as to be difficult to detect or recognize. As such, this subtlety in relation to the consequences to sin can be very deceiving for those who do not live soberly or sensibly in the light of the principles and promises of Scripture. The subtle deception of the consequences of sin is seen in the preacher’s statement in Ecclesiastes 8:11-12.

11 Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. 12 Although a sinner does evil a hundred times and may lengthen his life, still I know that it will be well for those who fear God, who fear Him openly.

If a man defies the law of gravity by jumping from the San Francisco Bridge, he will immediately experience the result with a plunge to his death. The deceptive subtlety is in the fact that the consequences of sinful behavior patterns are not as immediately obvious as they are when we defy the law of gravity. When one breaks spiritual laws, there are definite consequences that go into effect though the results are often not so immediately obvious.

Those who do not control their appetites, as in the use of wine, often end up wasting their lives and resources. The apostle Paul warns us about this in Ephesians 5:18, “And do not get drunk with wine, which is debauchery, but be filled (controlled) by the Spirit. “Debauchery,” is a translation of the Greek term asotia. Asotia refers to one who cannot save or deliver himself (absence of control) and thus ends up squandering his life’s resources (physical, spiritual, emotional, financial, and social). The prodigal son in Luke 15:11f is the classic biblical illustration.

What does the term “random” bring to mind? The word means, “having no specific pattern, purpose, or objective.”75 “At random” means to be without a governing design, method, or purpose.” This is exactly the way much of the world lives. From a biblical perspective, people’s lives are random, out of control, lacking in God’s design and purpose to guide and bring control and meaning to life.

In his commentary on 1 Peter 1:13, my good friend, Bob Deffinbaugh has a comment that illustrates this random mentality of our society:

Perhaps you have seen “The Dead Poet’s Society,” a movie my wife and I saw some time ago. As I recall, a translated Latin phrase, “Seize the moment!” became the philosophy of a group of college students. “Seize the moment!” aptly characterizes the spirit of our age; it also betrays the absence of the most vital element of hope. Sadly, our “now generation” has become the “hopeless generation.”76

If the inner forces or energies that operate within us, even the God-given desires, are not harnessed and brought under control via God’s designs and values, they will invariably do serious damage and leave us at best empty and at their worst, devastated and in despair. British statesman Edmund Burke argued,

…men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their own appetites. Society cannot exist meaningfully unless a controlling power upon man’s appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there is without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.77

Regarding the consequences of a lack of self-control, we have the sober warnings of Scripture:

1 Timothy 6:7-10 For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. 8 And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. 10 For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. (emphasis mine)

Titus 3:3 For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another.

The Means and Basis for Self-control

For the Christian, self-control and the life of good works that self-control should lead to is an outworking of the Christian’s redemptive restoration and reunion with God through his new relationship with Christ. However, though this new life in Christ equips believers for transformed living, it requires a restructuring and new management of the life based on the faith application of certain vital spiritual truths that will be briefly listed below. Since it is beyond the scope of this study to go into detail here, the reader may see this author’s in-depth study on the transformed life in Part Two of The ABCs for Christian Growth, Laying the Foundation on our web site.

Restructuring of the life means a transition from “gratifying the cravings of one’s sinful nature” to living out the believer’s new spiritual resources and hope as a new spiritual creation in Christ. “So then, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, new things have come!” (2 Cor. 5:17). Motivated by the matchless grace of God in Christ, believers are to “reject godless ways and worldly desires to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age” (Tit. 2:12). The three key resources for change and inner control of the life are:

1. The life-changing nature of the believer’s union in Christ: saved from sin—its penalty and power or reign (Rom. 6 and Col. 2)

2. The enabling ministry of the indwelling Spirit (Gal. 5; Eph. 3:16f; 5:18f)

3. The transforming ministry of the Word (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:21f; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 2:1ff; Jam. 1:19f; Ps. 119).

Conclusion

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM KEY SCRIPTURES RELEVANT TO SELF-CONTROL

Acts 24:24-25: There is an obvious connection between faith, righteousness, and self-control in a persons life. Faith in Christ should bring self-control and a change in one’s character.

1 Corinthians 9:24-27: Verse 24 The context is that of rewards for running the race of life. Verse 25a The emphasis—in order to receive rewards, we must exercise self-control in all things or we will be hindered in our ability to run the race and win the rewards. Verses 25b-26 An important ingredient of self-control is remaining goal oriented. This means we need values and priorities which determine our goals and aid in self-control. Verse 27a Self-control requires discipline so that our bodies and all their members are our servants. The body makes a bad master, but a good slave. Verse 27b Points to the problem of hypocrisy and the potential of disqualification or loss of rewards.

1 Timothy 3:2: This verse shows self-control is crucial to our ability to minister and lead others in the things of Christ.

2 Timothy 1:7: Discipline here contains the ideas of self-control via mental balance or sound mind thinking. This verse emphasizes that self-control is God given. It comes from Him through the grace provision of our salvation in Christ.

2 Timothy 3:3: A lack of self-control is one of the characteristics of the last days. It is a sure sign of moral and spiritual break down in society.

Titus 1:8: Self-control is again listed among the spiritual qualifications for leadership in the church.

Titus 2:2: Older men, men of maturity should be characterized by self-control.

1 Corinthians 6:12: Self-control is not just a matter whether something is right or wrong as in the typical doubtful things or questionable issues; rather it a matter of whether or not something masters or controls one’s life? If so, it is always wrong.

2 Peter 1:6: Self-control is listed among the virtues we are to add to our lives through the power of God.

2 Peter 2:19: This verse draws our attention to a fundamental truth—we becomes the slaves of whatever we do not control. When this happens, we can no longer be the complete servants of Christ.

We can see from this brief summary why self-control or staying spiritually sober is so important. Simply put, without self-control, we become the slaves of all our enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) and become incapacitated, unable to serve God and one another or even our own best interests. We end up not only serving ourselves, but we become slaves to our appetites. “By what a man is overcome, by this he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19).

As a part of the context for 2 Peter 2:19, compare 2 Peter 2:14 with 1 Timothy 4:7. If we are not training ourselves in the life of godliness and self-control, we will become trained and skilled in greed and covetousness, which is idolatry, the worship of the flesh and its appetites.

SELF-CONTROL AND THE ISSUE OF FAITH IN ETERNAL AND HEAVENLY TREASURE

As one reflects on the Lord’s teaching in Matthew 6:19f, we are brought to one of the great issues in sober, self-controlled living. The Lord was seeking to show the great need and value of turning our focus from earthly to heavenly affections because of the very temporal and inadequate nature of the things on which the world so totally focuses (compare 1 Timothy 6:17-19). Only when our affections and objectives are focused on the Savior and the eternal realities of His kingdom through faith will we have the capacity for self-control.

Our new life in Christ by grace through faith is designed to produce good works for which we were recreated in Christ (Eph. 28-10). But as the Savior warned in Mark 4:19 in the parable of the soil, the sower, and the seed, “the cares of life, the deceit of wealth and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it produces nothing.” Whatever draws our desires and affections away from Christ and His kingdom will of necessity become our master and control our lives. Sober Christian living is not random nor does it live for the moment as does the world, rather it lives with an undivided hope because it recognizes this world is passing away and everything in it. The self-control seen in the life of Moses because of his eternal hope illustrates this beautifully:

Hebrews 11:24-26 By faith, when he grew up, Moses refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be ill-treated with the people of God than to enjoy sin’s fleeting pleasure. He regarded abuse suffered for Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for his eyes were fixed on the reward.

As Peter has reminded us, we must gird up the loins of our minds, keep sober, and completely hope on the grace to be brought to us when our Lord returns to be revealed in all His glory.

Session 11

1. What are habits and behavior the products of?

2. Please define self-control. Refer to 1 John 2:16 and Galatians 5:19-21.

3. What are we to be in control of and how are we to achieve it?

4. Describe the results of giving in to the cravings of the flesh and worldly appeals and temptations?

5. What is the essence of self-control?

6. In using the terms “lusts” and “intense desires of the flesh”, what is the apostle Paul referring to?

7. What examples does he give in Ephesians 2:1-3 and 4:17-19?

8. In 1 John 2:16, what are the three powerful energies of the inner man?

9. What are the five spiritual dynamics involved in biblical self-control?

10. How are the pursuit of personal significance and the absence of self-control linked? (Please refer back to the segment on Mark #4, A Biblical Concept of Oneself. )

11. Where do we find our true significance in this life?

12. In what areas of your life do you struggle with self-control?

13. Are you most vulnerable to giving in to these sins during times of success, or times of stress and self-doubt? Please explain.

14. In taking an honest look at yourself, what is it that drives your life personally in your pursuit of earthly goals (career, wealth, possessions, status, reputation, acceptance by others, etc. )?

15. It is stated on page 70 of the text that a “man’s obsession with significance forms a tremendous obstacle to self-control and the joyous life and rest God wants us to have in Christ”. How is your pursuit of significance linked to your inability to control your lusts of your flesh, your eyes, and your pride?

16. How does this impact your ability to enjoy the joyous life and rest God wants you to have in Christ?

17. Describe how the areas in your life where you lack self-control impact your ability to be effective as a biblical leader in your home, church, workplace, or community.

18. What are the three key resources for change that form the means and basis for inner control?

GROUP DISCUSSION:

“If we are not training ourselves in the life of godliness and self-control, we will become trained and skilled in greed and covetousness, which is idolatry, the worship of the flesh and its appetites."

What are the biblical motivations for have self control and how should you use them in your life beginning now?

What steps will you take to deal with the areas of your life that are out of control?

NPS Bible Study Lesson 4

MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #11: The Pursuit of Excellence

Introduction

In keeping with the biblical goal of spiritual growth and greater levels of maturity, we often find in Scripture the call to abound or excel in Christian character, especially in the various ways we can express love to one another. Spiritual maturity is a quest for character for which there will be little progress without the pursuit of excellence. Without pursuing excellence, life will remain bland, very vanilla, lukewarm at best (see Rev. 3:15-16). The quest for excellence fuels our fire and keeps us from just drifting downstream gathering debris. This focus and need becomes quickly evident from the following verses.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Philippians 1:9-10 And this I pray, that your love may abound (i.e., excel) still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; 11 having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. (NET)

2 Corinthians 8:7 But as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, and in all eagerness and in the love from us that is in you—make sure that you excel in this act of kindness too. (NET)

1 Thessalonians 3:12 And may the Lord cause you to increase and abound (excel) in love for one another and for all, just as we do for you, 3:13 so that your hearts are strengthened in holiness to be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 4:1 Finally then, brethren, we request and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that, as you received from us instruction as to how you ought to walk and please God (just as you actually do walk), that you may excel still more. (NASB)

1 Thessalonians 4:10 for indeed you do practice it (love) toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more (NASB)

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (NET)

Matthew 22:37-38 Jesus said to him, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ 22:38 This is the first and greatest commandment.

From these verses, it should be clear that God wants His people to abound or excel in both what they are (inward character) and in what they do (behavior or good deeds). It would seem obvious that there is simply no way one can love God with all his heart (Matt. 22:37) without seeking to do his or her best to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). Since that is so, the pursuit of excellence is both a goal and a mark of spiritual maturity. However, for this to be true, the pursuit of excellence must be motivated by the right values, priorities, and motives. If we go astray here, the pursuit of excellence can quickly become a mark of immaturity and just another result of man’s obsession with his own significance, which, as mentioned previously, is a perilous pursuit.

It is known that Admiral Hyman G. Rickover’s interviews were legendary and one of the reasons is he always wanted to cut through the glib and rehearsed answers to get a look at the person underneath. He especially wanted to know how candidates would act under stress. On occasion he had them sit in a chair with the front legs sawed off an inch or two shorter than the back, to keep them off-balance. In his autobiography Why Not the Best?, President Jimmy Carter tells about his Rickover interview.

The admiral asked how he had stood in his class at the Naval Academy. “I swelled my chest with pride and answered, ‘Sir, I stood 59th in a class of 820!’ I sat back to wait for the congratulations. Instead came the question: ‘Did you do your best?’ I started to say, ‘Yes, sir,’ but I remembered who this was. I gulped and admitted, ‘No, sir, I didn’t always do my best.’ He looked at me for a long time, and then asked one final question, which I have never been able to forget—or to answer. He said, ‘Why not?”78

Because of who Christians are in Christ, because of our eternal hope, and because of the enabling grace of God available to all believers in Christ, seeking to do our best and choosing what is best is part of God’s will and an evidence of genuine spiritual growth and maturity. However, there is one distinction that needs to be stressed up front. As Edwin Bliss once said, “The pursuit of excellence is gratifying and healthy. The pursuit of perfection is frustrating, neurotic, and a terrible waste of time.”79 As finite human beings, none of us ever arrive, as they say, and there will always be room for growth and improvement (see Phil. 3:12-14). While this reality should never promote negligence or apathy or slothfulness, and while we should seek to grow, mature, and do our best, understanding this reality should help us all relax and rejoice in the Lord.

Definitions and Explanations

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IS NOT TO BE A QUEST FOR SUPERIORITY

In the first definition in The American Heritage Dictionary, excellence is defined as “The state, quality, or condition of excelling; superiority.80 The word excel is defined as, “to do or be better than; surpass; to show superiority, surpass others.” Then under the word excel, the following terms are listed and explained as synonyms for excel.

The words excel, surpass, exceed, transcend, outdo, outstrip all suggest the concept of going beyond a limit or standard. To excel is to be preeminent (excels at figure skating) or to be or perform at a level higher than that of another or others (excelled her father as a lawyer). To surpass another is to be superior in performance, quality, or degree: is surpassed by few as a debater; happiness that surpassed description. Exceed can refer to being superior, as in quality (an invention that exceeds all others in ingenuity), to being greater than another, as in degree or quantity (a salary exceeding 50 thousand dollars a year), and to going beyond a proper limit (exceed one’s authority; exceed a speed limit). Transcend often implies the attainment of a level so high that comparison is hardly possible: Great art transcends mere rules of composition. To outdo is to excel in doing or performing: didn’t want to be outdone in generosity. Outstrip is often interchangeable with outdo but strongly suggests leaving another behind, as in a contest: It is a case of the student outstripping the teacher.81

Competition or being better than others is a prominent part of the above definitions. But when we think of the pursuit of excellence from a biblical standpoint, is that what is meant? No! As the above terms and their explanations suggest, those who approach or look at life from the viewpoint of the world typically think in terms of competition, of outstripping others, but such is usually done for one’s own glory or significance or for the praise or applause of men.

Brian Harbour picks up on this issue in Rising Above the Crowd: “Success means being the best. Excellence means being your best. Success, to many, means being better than everyone else. Excellence means being better tomorrow than you were yesterday. Success means exceeding the achievements of other people. Excellence means matching your practice with your potential.”82

Gene Stallings tells of an incident when he was defensive backfield coach of the Dallas Cowboys. Two All-Pro players, Charlie Waters and Cliff Harris, were sitting in front of their lockers after playing a tough game against the Washington Redskins. They were still in their uniforms, and their heads were bowed in exhaustion. Waters said to Harris, “By the way Cliff, what was the final score?”83

As these men illustrate, excellence isn’t determined by comparing our score or performance to someone else’s. The pursuit of excellence comes from doing our best with what we have to God’s glory and with a view to growing and improving, but not with a view to the score or who is watching from man’s standpoint.

So then, biblically speaking, the pursuit of excellence refers to pursuing and doing the best we can with the gifts and abilities God gives, giving our best to the glory of God. But ideally, it is done without the spirit of competition or seeking to excel simply to be better than others. Excellence includes doing common, everyday things, but in very uncommon ways regardless of whether people are watching. The reality is that God sees our work and rewards us accordingly (cf. 1 Cor. 15:58).

PURSUING EXCELLENCE SHOULD NOT BE LIMITED BY THE NATURE OF THE TASK

The emphasis of the exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:31 is that we are to do whatever we do, whether it is viewed as important by society or very menial and insignificant, whether one is the president of a large company or one who cleans the offices at night, all is to be done to the glory of God. Regardless what we do, it deserves our best for in the long run, it reflects on the honor and glory of our God and will ultimately be rewarded by Him (1 Cor. 15:58).

The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.84

1 Corinthians 15:58 So then, dear brothers and sisters, be firm. Do not be moved! Always be outstanding ( perisseuo, “abounding, doing over and above, excelling) in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IS A MATTER OF CHOOSING THE BEST

The pursuit of excellence is never a matter of simply choosing between what is good or bad, but of choosing what is best or superior because it will better enable us to accomplish what God has designed us to be and do (cf. Phil. 1:9 with Eph. 2:10).

In keeping with the fact that all believers are to abound or excel in the expression of Christian love, the apostle prayed that the Philippians my have greater knowledge and every kind of discernment. But in order to excel in love and wisely express it, they needed to be able “to approve the things that are excellent” (NASB) or choose what is best (my translation). The term “approve” or “choose” is the Greek dokimazo, which carries two ideas. First, it means “to put to the test, examine,” and then as a result of the examination or testing, “to approve, make the right choice.” Through the values and priorities that come from the knowledge of God’s Word, we are to examine and test, and then choose accordingly.

What is to be chosen is explained by the words “the things that are excellent” (NASB) or “what is best” (NET). The Greek word here is a present neuter participle from diaphero, which means in this context, “the things differing, but in accordance with what is best,” i.e., the best or what is excellent.

The pursuit of excellence from a biblical world view is always connected with the issue of God’s values and priorities. This means the pursuit of excellence must include the elimination of some things even though they may be good and legitimate. The principle is are they the best and will they get in the way or hinder the main objectives of a Christian’s life based on biblical principles and values? If so, they need to be eliminated. We see this truth in Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 10:23, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify” (see also 1 Cor. 6:12). Just because they are legitimate does not mean they should be chosen or pursued.

Film-maker Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a story’s pacing. Ward Kimball, one of the animators for Snow White, recalls working 240 days on a 4-1/2 minute sequence in which the dwarfs made soup for Snow White and almost destroyed the kitchen in the process. Disney thought it funny, but he decided the scene stopped the flow of the picture, so out it went. When the film of our lives is shown, will it be as great as it might be? A lot will depend on the multitude of ‘good’ things we decided to eliminate to make way for the great things God wants to do through us.85

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IS AN ALL-INCLUSIVE PURSUIT

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

1 Corinthians 10:31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Both of these passages point us to the all-inclusive nature of the pursuit of excellence. The words, “whatever your hand finds to do” and “whatever you do” point to the importance of doing our very best in everything we do. The preacher of Ecclesiastes teaches us that apart from faith in God and living one’s life for Him, life is empty and futile. But this does not mean that men should therefore have a supine attitude by which one simply drifts along since nothing really matters because it does. Life is full of opportunities and there is work to be done. This means that the strength and abilities we have are to be used to take advantage of the opportunities God gives us as they lie in the scope of our gifts, strength, His leading, and our responsibilities.

Besides encouraging his readers to enjoy life as God enabled them, Solomon also encouraged them to work diligently. The idiom whatever your hand finds to do means “whatever you are able to do” (cf. 1 Sam. 10:7).86

If it is a task worth doing, it is a task worth doing right and diligently.

Perhaps it might be worthwhile to make a list of as many areas as we can think of where the pursuit of excellence should touch and change our lives. Be specific! Are there any areas or tasks that I have not really taken seriously and I need to work on? Scripture says, “whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). This would mean our occupation, ministries, family, hobbies, recreation, etc.

PURSUING EXCELLENCE IS A MATTER OF A WHOLE-HEARTED ENDEAVOR

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Deuteronomy 6:4-5 “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! “And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.

Matthew 23:37-38 Jesus said to him, ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment.

These three passages also point us to the importance of whole-hearted endeavor in whatever we do as Christians. But even more basic than that, Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 23:37 teach us that pursuing excellence is a matter of the heart, of the inner person and proceeds from a inner faith/relationship with God. Scripture clearly teaches the real issues of life are spiritual and are really matters of the heart, the inner man. Maybe it’s for this reason the word “heart” is found 802 times in the NASB, 830 in the KJV, 837 in the NKJV and 570 in the NIV. Heart is one of the most commonly used words of the Bible and most of these occurrences are used metaphorically of the inner person. When so used, they refer to either the mind, the emotions, the will, to the sinful nature, or inclusively to the total inner person. Thus, the term heart speaks of the inner person and the spiritual life as the seat and center of all that proceeds from a person’s life. Like the physical pump, the spiritual heart is central and vital to who we are and how we live.

Both Solomon and the Lord Jesus teach us that the issues of life proceed from the heart (Pr. 4:23; Matt. 6:21; 12:34; 15:18). What we do in word and deed is first of all a product of what we are on the inside from the standpoint of what we truly believe and how we think. This is easily illustrated by the Lord Jesus in His teaching in the sermon on the mount. There He spoke strongly against the mere external and performance-oriented hypocrisy of the religious Pharisees. Importantly, in Matthew 5:17-48, no less than six times, He contrasted the external teaching of the Pharisees with His own teaching which stressed the inner life. Note the following statements:

“You have heard … but I say to you …” (vss. 21-22)

“You have heard … but I say to you …” (vss. 27-28)

“It was said … but I say to you …” (vss. 31-32)

“You have heard … but I say to you …” (vss. 33-34)

“You have heard … but I say to you …” (vss. 38-38)

“You have heard … but I say to you …” (vss. 43-44)

What was the Lord seeking to communicate? He was reminding the people of the moral precepts they had been taught by their religious leaders for years, precepts which often had their source in the Old Testament Scriptures. But then, with the words, “but I say to you,” He addressed those same issues again as being first and foremost matters of the heart. This and only this is authentic Christianity and reveals an intimate walk with God by faith. Anything else is nothing more than religious hypocrisy and will fail to pursue excellence, at least from the right motives.

Because of the central place and importance of the heart in all we do, which naturally includes the pursuit of excellence, it would be well to think a moment about some issues concerning the heart as it applies to doing our best for the glory of the Lord.87 By itself, the heart is not a safe haven. It needs guarding or protection from invasion by the world system around us and from the sinful nature that dwells within us. In Proverbs 4:23, Solomon wrote, “More than any act of guarding, guard your heart, for from it are the sources of life” (NET). The heart needs special care because the heart, which includes the mind, the emotions, and will, is the place where we deposit the knowledge of God or biblical wisdom; it is the place of our values (Matt. 6:21) and priorities and where vital choices are made. Thus, it becomes the wellspring, the source of whatever affects life and character (see Mt 12:35; 15:19).

Swindoll has a good word here:

Relentlessly, we struggle for survival, knowing that any one of those strikes can hit the target and spread poison that can immobilize and paralyze, rendering us ineffective. And what exactly is that target? The heart. That’s what the Bible calls it. Our inner person. Down deep, where hope is born, where decisions are made, where commitment is strengthened, where truth is stored, mainly where character (the stuff that gives us depth and makes us wise) is formed. . .

The quest for character requires that certain things be kept in the heart as well as kept from the heart. An unguarded heart spells disaster. A well-guarded heart means survival. If you hope to survive the jungle, overcoming each treacherous attack, you’ll have to guard your heart.88

Indeed, the heart needs guarding. We need to place a sentinel over the heart because it is the storehouse for the treasures that lead to the formation of Christ-like character. But these treasure can be stolen by the variegated deceptions and temptations of Satan who seeks to seduce us to pursue the lust patterns of destruction like power, prestige, pleasure, possessions, fortune and fame and always at the expense of the pursuit of excellence and godly character.

In keeping with the idea of excelling, the pursuit of excellence naturally works against a half-hearted, drift along or go-with-the-flow kind of mentality. As Ecclesiastes 9:10 shows, to do our best requires doing it with all our might. In keeping with the rest of Scripture, this means “with all the ability and strength that God gives us.” And, as Matthew 23:37 and Deuteronomy 6:5 teach us, pursuing excellence is a matter of giving the whole heart. But this does not mean there is no place for leisure or rest and relaxation.

A certain amount of rest and relaxation is essential to our physical, emotional, and mental well-being. It is not only okay to relax, but it is essential as long as it is kept in the scheme of its purpose and not used as an excuse for laziness and irresponsibility. The goal is to enhance our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual well-being. Strangely, however, in our workaholic society many people, and this include a lot of Christians, get their sense of identity and significance from work and a busy schedule. They often give their all, but for selfish reasons—the pursuit of position, praise, or significance. Some Christians even promote the idea that you really aren’t living for the Lord unless your are “overcommitted, hassled, grim-faced, tight-lipped believers… plowing through responsibilities like an overloaded freight train under a full head of steam…”89 Some would view such behavior as a sign of pursuing excellence when in reality, it can become a hindrance because of the debilitating impact on one’s physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.

Swindoll writes:

Strangely, the one thing we need is often the last thing we consider. We’ve been programmed to think that fatigue is next to godliness. That the more exhausted we are (and look!), the more committed we are to spiritual things and the more we earn God’s smile of approval. We bury all thoughts of enjoying…for those who are genuinely dedicated Christians are those who work, work, work. And preferably, with great intensity. As a result, we have become a generation of people who worship our work… who work at our play… and who play at our worship.

Hold it! Who wrote that rule? Why have we bought that philosophy? Whatever possessed someone to make such a statement? How did we ever get caught in that maddening undertow?

I challenge you to support it from the Scriptures…

According to Mark 6:30-34, Jesus purposely sought relief from the hurried pace of ministering to others and advised his apostles to do the same.90

The pursuit of excellence will mean hard work and diligence which may take on various forms—research, study, time, sweat, planning, brainstorming for ideas, etc. It may well mean swimming against the stream and sometimes navigating the rocky and swift rapids of life. It will often be exhausting and bring us up against that which is really beyond us. Thus, in keeping with our own shortcomings and weaknesses, the pursuit of excellence in the execution of our daily routine or special projects is something that must be pursued by God’s strength. Such a mentality can be seen in the attitude and actions of the apostle Paul. As one totally committed to God’s purpose for his life, Paul gave his all to be all God wanted him to be in seeking to bring men to maturity in Christ, but he did so by God’s enablement rather than by his own strength.

Colossians 1:25-29 I became a servant of the church according to the stewardship of the grace of God—given to me for you—in order to complete the word of God, 1:26 that is, the mystery that has been kept hidden from ages and generations, but has now been revealed to his saints. 1:27 God wanted to make known to them the glorious riches of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. 1:28 We proclaim him by instructing and teaching all men with all wisdom so that we may present every man mature in Christ. 1:29 Toward this goal I also labor, struggling according to his power that powerfully works in me.

Motives for the Pursuit of Excellence

THE GLORY OF GOD

1 Corinthians 10:31 So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.

In thinking about biblical motives for the pursuit of excellence we are brought face-to-face with the issue of the chief purpose for the Christian life. In 1 Corinthians 10:31, Paul reminds us that whatever we do (in keeping with our purpose) is to glorify God. This naturally includes pursuing excellence. The Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes this point with the words “Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” For the Christian who is be concerned about his motives, this is the appropriate starting place. This comment by the apostle Paul and the statement from the Shorter Catechism brings us to the heart of the matter and it is doubtful if the issue can be more accurately and succinctly expressed. Christians must constantly be reminded that nothing less than the glory of God should be the motive for whatever they do and how they do it. To glorify God means to bring honor and greater respect to God’s name among men and even the angelic world who watch the behavior of the church (see Eph. 3:10). Every other consideration must be brought into subjection to this supreme objective.

THE PRINCIPLE OF REDEEMING THE TIME, USING OUR OPPORTUNITIES

Ecclesiastes 9:10 Whatever your hand finds to do, verily, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

Ecclesiastes 9:10b, “for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” brings us to the climax of Solomon’s point in this verse. It may be that Jesus Christ was paraphrasing verse 10 when he said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work” (John 9:4). Solomon was not saying anything sub-Christian here. Scripture knows nothing of a purgatory where one can pick up or gain what was neglected in this life. The New Testament agrees that it is deeds done in the body that count.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.

The reason for the preacher’s advice in Ecclesiastes is that once death comes we can no longer buy up or use all opportunities for work and service. After death a person will have no further opportunities for work; there will be neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom. We must not think this passage is suggesting soul sleep; see comments on our web page regarding “soul sleep.”

ETERNAL REWARDS

1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding (excelling) in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord.

Colossians 3:23 Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, 3:24 because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward. Serve the Lord Christ.

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil.

Another awesome reason for the pursuit of excellence is that our toil in the Lord is never in vain if done in His strength or by the enabling ministry of the Spirit of God. All Christians will one day stand before the Judgment (Bema) Seat of Christ to receive back for what they have done while alive in this life.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 For no one can lay any foundation other than what is being laid, which is Jesus Christ. 3:12 If anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, or straw, each builder’s work will be plainly seen, for the Day will make it clear, because it will be revealed by fire. And the fire will test what kind of work each has done. 3:14 If what someone has built survives, he will receive a reward. 3:15 If someone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss. He himself will be saved, but only as through fire.

The consequences of the dishonor to the Lord, failure to be a blessing to others, failing to use our opportunities, and the possibility of the loss of rewards form excellent motivations for the pursuit of excellence.

The Role of Attitude in the Pursuit of Excellence

How does one develop the pursuit of excellence? What are some of the things involved by way of the means for pursuing our best?

From the standpoint of that which affects the way we work, there is probably nothing more important than one’s attitude! Our choice of attitude impacts every decision we make on a day-to-day, moment-by-moment basis. Our attitude can either fire our hopes and the pursuit of the things that are important or it can extinguish our hopes and pursuits. The value of one’s attitude on what we pursue—our values, priorities, objectives, and how we pursue them is very evident in the book of Philippians where one of the themes is that of joy or rejoicing in the Lord no matter what the conditions or circumstances of life.

While chained daily to a Roman soldier in his own apartment, Paul wrote the following which is literally satiated with a positive attitude that clearly fueled his hopes against all odds.

Philippians 1:12-22 I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that my situation has actually turned out to advance the gospel. 13 The results of this are that the whole imperial guard and everyone else knows that I am in prison for the sake of Christ, 14 and that most of the brothers, having confidence in the Lord because of my imprisonment, now more than ever dare to speak the word without fear.

15 Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. 16 The latter do so from love because they know that I am placed here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, because they think they can cause trouble for me in my imprisonment. 18 What is the result? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 20 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 Now if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean productive work for me; yet I don’t know what I prefer:

Then, in Philippians, as an encouragement to “working together harmoniously for the faith of the gospel” (1:27) Paul wrote:

Philippians 2:1-2 If therefore there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Note what the apostle is doing. There is encouragement which comes from our being in Christ, consolation or comfort which comes from God’s love for us, the love of Christians for one another, and there is a marvelous fellowship of the Spirit. This leads to affection and compassion in the hearts of God’s people. So Paul encourages the Philippians to allow the above realities to impact their attitudes in their relationship with one another—to have the same mind, maintain the same love, be united in spirit, and intent on one purpose.

Then, in a context dealing with two women who had served with him in the gospel, but were having difficulties in their relationship with one another, Paul wrote:

Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice! 4:5 Let your steady determination be seen by all. The Lord is near! 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything. Instead, tell your requests to God in your every prayer and petition—with thanksgiving. 4:7 And the peace of God that surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

4:8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is worthy of respect, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if something is excellent or praiseworthy, think about these things. 4:9 And what you learned and received and heard and saw in me, do these things. And the God of peace will be with you.

Finally, in thanking the Macedonians for their support, we are given these words that display the power of maintaining or choosing the right attitude by faith in what we have in Christ:

Philippians 4:11-13 Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. 13 I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Conclusion

There is a colorful illustration in the life of the great violinist, Paganini, which shows the value and power of attitude on the pursuit of excellence.

The colorful, nineteenth-century showman and gifted violinist Nicolo Paganini was standing before a packed house, playing through a difficult piece of music. A full orchestra surrounded him with magnificent support. Suddenly one string on his violin snapped and hung gloriously down from his instrument. Beads of perspiration popped out on his forehead. He frowned but continued to play, improvising beautifully.

To the conductor’s surprise, a second string broke. And shortly thereafter, a third. Now there were three limp strings dangling from Paganini’s violin as the master performer completed the difficult composition on the one remaining string. The audience jumped to its feet and in good Italian fashion, filled the hall with shouts and screams, “Bravo! Bravo!” As the applause died down, the violinist asked the people to sit back down. Even though they knew there was no way they could expect an encore, they quietly sank back into their seats.

He held the violin high for everyone to see. He nodded at the conductor to begin the encore and then he turned back to the crowd, and with a twinkle in his eye, he smiled and shouted, ‘Paganini…and one string!’ After that he placed the single-stringed Stradivarius beneath his chin and played the final piece on one string as the audience (and the conductor) shook their heads in silent amazement. ‘Paganini…and one string!

Session 12

1. Using your dictionary, please define “excellence”.

2. How is “excellence” defined from a biblical standpoint?

3. What, then, is the difference between “success” and excellence”?

4. Describe, in detail, the biblical pursuit of excellence.

5. What is the pursuit of excellence always connected to?

6. Make a list of as many areas you can think of where the pursuit of excellence should touch and change your life.

7. Are there any areas or tasks that you have not really taken seriously and need to work on?

8. According to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Matthew 23:37, what is the pursuit of excellence a matter of?

9. What are the biblical motives for the pursuit of excellence?

10. Describe the areas of your life where you are pursuing excellence purely for the glory of God.

11. In what areas in your life are you pursuing excellence for your own success and not for the glory of God?

12. Why is it important to “redeem time” and to “use your opportunities”?

13. What are the goals you now pursue that are for rewards in this life and not for eternal rewards?

14. Read Philippians 1:12-22. Describe in detail the attitude of the apostle Paul.

15. What were his goals? Again, be specific.

16. How would you rearrange your priorities so that you would pursue biblical excellence in your role as a husband, father, member of the Body of Christ, and in your community?

17. What pursuits would you give up?

18. What specifically would you focus on?

GROUP DISCUSSION:

What will be the most radical change in your life when you pursue excellence solely for the glory of God, for the redemption of your time and opportunities, and only for eternal rewards?

NPS Bible Study Lesson 5

MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #12: Endurance or Perseverance and Patience

Introduction

As the Psalmist declares, the world in which we live beautifully reflects the glory of God (Ps. 19:1-6); indeed, it is not only a mighty revelation of His divine power (Rom. 1:20), but of the daily grace and mercy of God’s beneficial providence (Acts 14:17; Job 5:9-10; Ps. 65;). Life is filled with a variety of wonderful varied blessings that God has given us to enjoy (1 Tim. 6:17). But it is also true, if we realistic look at the other side of the coin, life is also much like a jungle; it is a sinful and fallen world that operates under the dominating, sinister, and deceptive policies of one whom the Bible describes as “the ruler of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11) and “the God of this age” (2 Cor. 4:4). Because of Satan’s deceitful activities and because of the devastating effects of the fall of man as recorded in Genesis 3, which includes a creation that groans under the curse enacted because of the fall (Rom. 8:19-22), we live in a cruel world that is often extremely hostile. The history of mankind and the daily news is a marked testimony to that fact.

In this world, man lives in rebellion against God and with a great deal of hostility against his fellow man, especially for those who stand in allegiance to the Lord Jesus (cf. John 15:18-23). Truly, it’s a jungle out there! The daily headlines bear testimony to this reality. We hear of disasters and catastrophes. There are killer earthquakes, deadly hurricanes and tornadoes, and floods in some parts of the world while long-term droughts destroy other areas. In addition, we have witnessed moral degeneracy and breakdown on every level in our society. In this country alone—once a truly Christian nation led by men of great faith and courage—we have seen tremendous moral breakdown as evidenced by so many heart-breaking events. Most recently, we have witnessed a rash of school shootings with children killing teachers and students. In addition, we have witnessed church bombings, parental and spouse abuse, and even parents murdering their own children. Our streets are full of crime—drugs, murder, theft, rape, fraud, and on and on the list goes.

Equally disturbing is the gross indecency we have witnessed in our nation’s capitol at the highest level of leadership, but even more troublesome is the fact this behavior by the President didn’t seem to bother very many Americans. It seems they were more concerned about financial prosperity or maintaining their comfortable lifestyle and didn’t want to rock the boat. But this short overview of what we are facing in our fallen world does not even touch on the many problems we are each susceptible to like diseases that strike and destroy lives and families. Finally, in addition to all of the above, there has been a growing attack on the Christian community and often by our own government through the courts. Christian bashing and intimidation is regular fare by a very liberal media and the Hollywood crowd, a group that has become more and more degenerate with each passing year.

Because of such conditions, which are on the rise (2 Tim. 3:12-13), the Christian life is sometimes characterized in the Bible as a race to be run (1 Cor. 9:24; Heb. 12:1; 2 Tim. 4:7) and a struggle or an athletic contest to be fought (1 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:9; 6:12; 2 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 10:32). Other prominent terms used of the Christian’s life in the world are labor or toil or work (1 Cor. 3:8; 15:58; 2 Cor. 11:27; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8) and testing or trials (Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet. 1:6; 4:12). Obviously, no one can continue to run in the race, stand firm in the struggles of life, labor effectively, or handle the trials of life without endurance or perseverance, and patience.

As mentioned throughout this series, the goal of spiritual maturity is Christ-likeness, attaining the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13) or being transformed into His image from glory to glory (cf. Rom. 8:28-29; 2 Cor. 3:18). Thus, in contrast to the ever fading glory on the face of Moses, Paul could write:

And we all, with unveiled faces reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another, which is from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

As with all the marks of spiritual maturity, the Lord Jesus is our perfect example in the mature qualities of endurance or perseverance, and patience. Thus, to encourage his readers to endure the trials of life, the author of Hebrews first pointed to the heroes of faith described in chapter 11 as a great cloud of witnesses who endured trials by faith in the promises and purposes of God. By the history of their lives, these Old Testament saints bear a constant testimony to us (Heb. 12:1). However, standing as the pinnacle or the supreme illustration of one who endured the cross and the many hostilities of sinners, he pointed his readers to the Lord Jesus. He stands as the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith or literally and simply “the faith.” He is the ultimate illustration of living the faith way of life. What is it that Christ did? He endured. Thus, in this great and moving passage, the author points us the Cross and the many hostilities the Savior endured as the catalyst and the example that should fortify Christians to endurance as they face the difficulties involved in living out their faith in a hostile and difficult world.

Hebrews 12:1-3 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, we must get rid of every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and run with endurance the race set out for us, 12:2 keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. For the joy set out for him he endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. 12:3 Think of him who endured such opposition against himself by sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls and give up.

I have read that the following words were spelled out in lights at the 18th Olympics at Tokyo, in 1964.

“The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part; just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is … to have fought well.”

I am reminded of some of Paul’s last words to encourage Timothy to persevere or endure:

2 Timothy 4:5- 7 But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. 6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; 8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (emphasis mine)

The Meaning of Endurance or Perseverance and Patience

THE BASIC IDEA AND MEANING IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

The American Heritage dictionary defines perseverance as “steady persistence in adhering to a course of action, a belief, or a purpose; steadfastness.” It defines endurance as “the act, quality, or power of withstanding hardship or stress,” but in the second definition it defines endurance as “the state or act of persevering.”92 While they are synonyms and each word carries in it the idea of “continuance,” perseverance lays stress on a given course of action in the face of difficulty or opposition. Endurance perhaps more strongly adds the idea of continuing under resistance or the adversities of life, to carry on in spite of hardships as “endure an Arctic winter.” Patience refers to the quality of enduring pain, hardship, provocation, or annoyance with calmness. In addition, patience can include the calm willingness to tolerate delay. In the New Testament, however, the Greek word usually translated patience is more often associated with patience with people and the endurance or perseverance with conditions, circumstances, and purposes. With this in mind, let’s now turn to an overview of the key Greek words and some of the New Testament passages involved with this quality of Christ-likeness.

THE MEANING OF THE GREEK WORDS FOR ENDURANCE AND PATIENCE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As with the English terms, all the words dealt with under this heading refer to man’s endurance or perseverance and patience when faced with the various difficulties of life, whether one’s behavior is that of passive resistance or active and courageous resistance with patience.

1. HUPOMONE (THE NOUN) AND HUPOMENO (THE VERB.

Most translations translate these words either by “endurance” or “perseverance,” depending on the context. Often, when continuance on a course is in view like bearing fruit or doing good works, “perseverance” is used. On the other hand, when continuance against difficult conditions are in view, “endurance” is used but this varies with the different translations. These words are a derivative of two words which means, “under” and another which means “to remain, abide.” Fundamentally, they connote the idea of remaining under pressure in the sense of endure, hold up under. Given the issues discussed earlier, the fallen condition of our world and its hostility to those who want to live godly and follow the Lord, these word are naturally used with relative frequency in the New Testament. The noun hupomone is used 32 times and the verb hopomeno 17 times. Because of these many uses, the time and the nature of this study will only allow a focus on some of the key uses.

2. KARTEREO

Kartereo is found only once in the New Testament, Hebrews 11:27, but the meaning of this word and its use here is significant to a study on endurance. Kartereo (from kratos, “strength”) means “to be strong, to be steadfast, to endure.” Speaking of Moses, the author of Hebrews wrote, “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen.” Hebrews 11:27 shows that the reason for Moses’ fearlessness and endurance was that in faith he kept the one who is invisible continually before his eyes. As in Hebrews 12:1, a vital element that strengthens the heart for endurance is keeping ones eyes on the Lord or staying focused on Him as the victorious Savior. While He is physically invisible to us, He is nevertheless revealed to us in the written Word. It is there, in the Word, that we can keep our eyes on the Savior.

3. MAKROTHUMEO AND MAKROTHUMIA

Makrothumeo (the verb, used 10 times in the New Testament) and makrothumia (the noun, used 14 times) are derived from a compound of ( makros) “long” and ( thumos), “temper, passion” thus, “long-tempered.” In secular Greek the meaning was perseverance rather than patience, but in the New Testament, these words took on a new flavor and significance. In biblical Greek they “denote particularly a divine forbearance which the recipients should themselves emulate in facing their problems. The Letter of Aristeas may have the new meaning. ‘By showing clemency ( makrothumia),’ said the envoy to the king, ‘you will turn your people from evil’ (p. 188).93

In the New Testament the verb is used actively meaning “to persevere, endure” (Heb. 6:15) or passively, “be patient, long-suffering” (Jam. 5:7-8). Thus, these words may describe either perseverance under trials (see Heb. 6:12 for this use with the noun) or the attitude of self-restraint that refuses to get even for a wrong that has been done but patiently endures rather than retaliate. Thus, these words characteristically represent long-suffering patience toward persons rather than things.94

4. ANECHO

Anecho, “to endure, bear with, put up with,” is found only in the middle voice in the New Testament, i.e., anechomai. As such, it means “to bear with either someone (Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:3) or something as a difficult pressure or affliction (2 Thess. 1:4).

5. ANEXIKAKOS,

This word, which occurs only in 2 Timothy 2:24, means “to bear evil without resentment, to be patient.” It is derived from the future form ( anexomai) of the verb just described, anecho, “to endure” plus the noun kakos, “evil.” Thus, it means “to patiently endure evil.” This noun “…implied in the LXX the quality of patiently affirming a belief in face of mockery” (Wis 2:19).

Important Lessons on Endurance and Patience from the New Testament

ENDURANCE OF CHRIST (2 THESS. 3:5)

We have an interesting statement in 2 Thessalonians 3:5 regarding endurance as a Christ-like quality that God wants to develop in our lives as a part of our spiritual growth. “Now may the Lord direct your hearts toward the love of God and the endurance of Christ.” There are three possible ways to take this passage grammatically and actually all three may apply, but it is the third one that is probably best and important to our study.

In this prayer, Paul prayed that either (1) they might wait patiently for the coming Savior as translated by the KJV, “into the patient waiting for Christ” (objective genitive), or (2) that they might have the kind of endurance that Christ gives, an endurance that comes from relationship with Him (subjective genitive), or (3) that they might experience the kind of endurance that belongs to Christ or that was demonstrated in His sufferings on earth and that He is demonstrating even now as He waits for His enemies to be made a footstool for His feet (Heb. 12:2; 10:13, either a possessive or attributive genitive). All three are true biblically and perhaps all are intended. This would then be what is sometimse called a plenary construction where the author intends more that one idea to be understood. Number three, however, was probably Paul’s intention. While a too rigid exegesis is to be avoided, it may, perhaps, be permissible to paraphrase: “the Lord teach and enable you to love as God loves, and to be patient as Christ is patient.”95 Thus again, maturity in Christ-likeness is the objective.

Similarly, Luke 8:11 and James 1:2-4 relate endurance to the issue of spiritual growth and maturity. In Luke 8:11 Jesus said, “But as for the seed that landed on the good soil, these are the ones who, after hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with steadfast endurance ( hupomone). Because of the hostile pressures mentioned in the previous soils (vss. 12-14), bearing fruit takes time and requires growth which here describes a steadfast endurance, just as it does for the farmer.

The relationship of suffering, endurance, and hope in the growth and maturity of Christians is also seen in Romans 5:3-4: “Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; and endurance, character; and character, hope.”

ENDURANCE OF TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

Naturally, our words for “endurance,” hupomone and hupomeno, are often used in connection with trials or tribulation, but never in the sense of mere resignation or a ‘grin and bear it’ attitude. Other biblical qualities or purposes are always associated with their use somewhere in the context. (a) They are often used in connection with God’s use of trials as tools for our growth and maturity. “Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance ( hupomone); and endurance ( hupomone), character; and character, hope” (Rom. 5:3-4). “My brothers and sisters, consider it nothing but joy when you fall into all sorts of trials, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect effect, so that you will be perfect and complete, not deficient in anything” (Jam. 1:2-4 see also Heb. 12:7). (b) Hupomone or endurance under affliction is also a means of establishing the reality of Christ in a Christian’s life or of attesting to the character of one’s walk with the Savior (cf. 1 Thess. 1:4; 2 Cor. 6:4; Jam. 1:12).

ENDURANCE OF HOPE

Our words for endurance, hupomone and hupomeno, are often used in connection with hope. In the New Testament, hope may look at the activity, hoping, or at the object or content of one’s hope, the things hoped for. It is the Christian’s hope, his confident expectation in what God is doing as a sovereign God and will do, that is one of the means to his endurance under affliction or trial. As will be stressed later, endurance is related to heavenly treasures, rewards, and the eternal future, especially to the return of the Lord and the glories that will follow. In 1 Thessalonians, which has such a strong emphasis on the return of the Lord (it is referred to in every chapter), Paul praises the Thessalonians for their “endurance of hope.” As translated by the NIV, this means “their endurance inspired by hope,” their hope in the return of the Savior (cf. 1 Thess. 1:3 with verse 10). In keeping with this focus on the return of Christ and the blessings it will bring, James reminds us that those who endure trials will receive the crown of life (Jam. 1:12).

ENDURANCE AND PATIENCE OF JOY

Endurance ( hupomone and hupomeno) and patience ( makrothumia and makrothumeo) are both used in connection with joy because the believer’s endurance under trials or patience with others should never be a matter of a grim resignation to a situation or a person who might try our patience. You know, the ‘grin and bear it’ routine where underneath the grin is a sigh of impatience. Rather, because both are to be motivated by hope in the Person, purposes, promises, and principles of God as found in His Word, biblical endurance and patience is to be encapsulated with joy (see Rom. 5:2-5; 12:12; Col. 1:11-12; Heb. 12:2).

Romans 5:2-4 …through whom we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in the hope of God’s glory. 5:3 Not only this, but we also rejoice in sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance; 5:4 and endurance, character; and character, hope.

Romans 12:12 Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer.

Steadfast hope, the confident expectation of what God is and will do, gives the capacity to endure with joy. Again, the Lord Jesus is our example and the perfect illustration of one whose endurance was connected with joy and the purposes and promises of God.

Hebrews 12:1b-2a …and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross,… (NASB)

As a fruit of being filled with the knowledge of God in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, Paul also links endurance and patience to a joyful spirit of thanksgiving.

Colossians 1:11-12 …bearing fruit in every good deed, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might for the display of all patience and steadfastness (endurance), with joy giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the saints’ inheritance in the light.

While it is debatable whether “with joy” should be connected with “steadfastness (endurance) and patience” (KJV, ASV, RSV, NEB) or with “giving thanks” (NIV, NET, NASB), the element of joy as a quality important to endurance and patience is evident in this passage. If the first construction, “steadfastness with joy,” is correct, joy is seen as the necessary element that is needed with endurance and patience. If “with thanksgiving” is correct, the passage is stressing that endurance and patience should be accompanied by “joyfully,” not begrudgingly, giving thanks to the Father. Paul quickly goes on to describe the kind of things for which we should be thankful. “Who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14). Our ability to endure and be patient is directly related to responding to our new life in Christ rather than on the transitory trials of life.

Colossians 1:11 is part of Paul’s prayer in verses 9-14 where he prays for the fruitful growth of the Colossians. He prays first that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. The goal of such knowledge is for a worthy walk, one that is consistent with who the believer is in Christ (verses 9-10). This is then followed in verses 11-14 with what should be the results, the fruit of such knowledge in all spiritual wisdom and understanding: (1) bearing fruit in every good work, (2) growing continually in the knowledge of God, (3) being strengthened with all power…for the display of all patience and endurance, and (4) with joy giving thanks to the Father…. Two important principles might be noted here. First, patience and endurance are the result of growth, of maturing in God’s truth as a believer learns who he is in Christ, complete and blessed with every spiritual blessing (Col. 2:10; Eph. 1:3), why he is here as an ambassador of Christ, and where he is going as one who is only a sojourner on his way to eternal glories and rewards. Second, patience or longsuffering and endurance always require the habitual influx of God’s strength because nothing less than God’s supernatural strength is needed to transform impatient sinners into persevering and patient saints. Finally, as already stressed, patience and endurance need that marvelous, life-changing attitude of joy or it becomes mere resignation. “The endurance and longsuffering of some saints is a kind of sour resignation to God’s will, their patience sticking out all over them. In reality, exultation, not resignation, is the fitting companion of these virtues (cf. Phil 1:29).”96

ENDURANCE AND THE IMAGES OF EXPENDED EFFORT

As we study the New Testament, we also find that our words for endurance ( hupomone and hupomeno) are used in connection with the images of the Christian life as a race to be run, as an object to pursue, and a battle to be fought (see Heb. 12:1; 1 Tim. 6:11-12). Without endurance by staying focused on the Lord Jesus, we could never run the race God has laid out for us here on this earth. Therefore, endurance is a quality that needs to be pursued with great endeavor.

1 Timothy 6:11-12 But you, as a person dedicated to God, keep away from all that. Instead pursue righteousness, godliness, faithfulness, love, endurance, and gentleness. Compete well for the faith (fight the good fight) and lay hold of that eternal life you were called for and made your good confession for in the presence of many witnesses.

ENDURANCE AND THE PATIENCE OF LOVE

Significantly, both of our main word groups for endurance ( hupomone and hupomeno) and patience ( makrothumia and makrothumeo) are used in connection with Christian love (1 Cor. 13:4, 7; 2 Tim. 2:10). Love remains steadfast or endures in the face of unpleasant circumstances and difficult people. Love is patient (1 Cor. 13:4) and endures all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Love ( agape), which is the product of the filling of the Spirit (Gal. 5:23), gives the capacity to remain steadfast for the sake of others. Thus, Paul could say, “So I endure all things for the sake of those chosen by God, that they too may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus and its eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). First Corinthians 13—the great chapter on Christian agape or love—gives us a description of the nature of love in verses 4-7 with its Christ-like qualities. These qualities, though certainly the product of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23),97 also give us a description of Christ Himself. For the church at Corinth, which was so full of division and party strife, these qualities of verses 4-7 provided a solution to their many problems as well as in the church today. Interestingly, the very first quality stated is “love is patient” ( makrothumei, a gnomic present tense of a general and timeless truth). In other words, love never retaliates or seeks to get even. Where that occurs, love will be absent. Love keeps the lid on over the long haul.

ENDURANCE AND PATIENCE AS DISTINGUISHING QUALITIES OF CHARACTER

In 2 Corinthians 6:4-6, both endurance ( hupomone) and patience ( makrothumia) are listed among many qualities that demonstrated or clearly established Paul and his associates as mature “servants of God,” as those completely devoted to the Lord and His service and calling. “Patience” and “endurance” are qualities that mark a believer out as a mature and devoted servant of Christ.

ENDURANCE AND PATIENCE, A WORTHY WALK, AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

In Christ, all the basic human distinctions that consistently hinder loving relationships and unity are removed in spite of the many differences that exist, differences that so often cause impatience. This is one of the themes in both Ephesians (see Eph. 2:11-22) and Colossians. Speaking of our new relationship with one another in Christ, Paul wrote:

Colossians 3:11 Here there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all and in all.

Norman L. Geisler has an excellent summary on this issue in the New Testament edition of The Bible Knowledge Commentary

In Christ distinctions are removed. These include national distinctions (Greek or Jew; Jews called all those outside their nation Greeks; cf. Gal. 3:28); religious distinctions (circumcised or uncircumcised); cultural distinctions (anyone foreign to Greek culture was a barbarian, and a Scythian was a wild, savage nomad); and economic or social distinctions (slave or free). If a Greek, an uncircumcised person, a barbarian, a Scythian, or a slave became a believer, he was a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17), a “new self” (Col. 3:10), just like a Jew or free person who became a Christian. For Christ is all, and is in all. That is, normal human distinctions are overruled and transfigured by one’s union in Christ.

All barriers are destroyed in Christ, and all believers are truly “created equal.” So it is to be expected that each believer—regardless of his nationality, former religion, culture, or economic standing—should do away with his former sinful practices and should live in accord with his “new self.”98

This new life in Christ requires a very different lifestyle, one that is consistent with who the Christian is in Christ. It’s a lifestyle that dramatically changes our attitudes and behavior toward other Christians. Thus, Paul wrote:

Ephesians 4:1 I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called,…

The “therefore” of verse 1 takes the readers back to what Paul wrote in chapters 1-3 as the basis for their need to walk worthily of the Lord. Naturally, we could never walk in a manner worthy of our Lord’s grace and mercy. The word “worthy” ( axios) means “of equal weight” and is simply calling believers to a walk that should be in balance with who they now are in Christ where all human distinctions have been removed. The point is that the Christian’s walk with Christ impacts both his inner personal life in belief and attitudes and his responsibility to other believers in the body of Christ.

Thus, to walk in a manner that balances with our new life in Christ, however, requires certain Christ-like qualities that include patience and forbearing with others as vital qualities to a worthy walk in unity with other believers.

Ephesians 4:2-3 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 4:3 making every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Colossians 3:12-13 Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with a heart of mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, 3:13 bearing with one another and forgiving one another,

When you think of the host of differences in people who are brought together in the body of Christ—social, religious, economic, racial, national, and age, not to mention the many personality differences—treating others with patience, putting up with them in love is a crucial ingredient for living and serving the Lord Jesus in unity, with harmony and effectiveness. My grandmother used to quote what a Quaker farmer would occasionally say to his wife to express how we need patience with others. He would say to his wife, “Everyone is very strange except thee and me, and thou art a little.”

The nature of patience ( makrothumia) as requiring forbearance toward others is brought out strongly by the words that immediately follow in both Ephesians 4:2 and Colossians 3:12-13. This demonstrates how patience should always express itself “in loving forbearance with one another.” To bear with another ( anechomai, “to bear with, put up with, endure”) is to put up with his or her faults, differences, and peculiarities (at least as it seems to us). We are to do so because we know we have our own, because we do not want to harm the unity of the body, because people are created in God’s image, and because we know God uses these very differences just as the differences of the members of our body are vital to our function (1 Cor. 12).

ENDURANCE AND PATIENCE IN THE COMMUNICATION AND RECEPTION OF GOD’S TRUTH

Two other passages using two different Greek words point to another important situation that requires the quality of patience, that of communicating the message of the gospel to others. Communicating God’s truth very often meets not only with resistance but hostility. This is true with non-Christians in evangelism or when seeking to teach and train Christians in the truth of the Word. When Paul preached in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-10), some of the Jews and God-fearing Greeks were persuaded, but many of the Jews became jealous with the final result Paul had to move on to Berea. Then, when he preached the resurrection to the philosophers in Athens, some began to scoff though others wanted to hear more (Acts 17:16-34). Satan, the god of this age, is against the truth and does everything in his power to blind the minds of men to God’s truth (2 Cor. 4:4f).

Unfortunately, such resistance and hostility may also come from Christians. The church at Corinth not only questioned Paul’s apostolic authority but they were critical of Paul’s person and ministry claiming, “His letters are weighty and forceful, but his physical presence is weak and his speech is of no account.” If you have sought to witness of the Savior or teach others the Word, you too may have run into resistance. It is an occasional experience for us with our teaching ministry on the Internet. Thus, witnessing, teaching, preaching, etc., requires a great deal of patience.

The first passage and the one using makrothumia is 2 Timothy 4:2. In view of the reality of the coming of the Lord and His judgment, Paul wrote, “preach the message (the Word), be persistent (or ready) whether it is convenient or inconvenient, reprove, rebuke, exhort with complete patience and teaching” (NET emphasis mine). This is immediately followed by the reason and need for complete patience.

2 Timothy 4:3-5 For there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have a craven curiosity to hear new things. 4 And they will turn away from hearing the truth, but on the other hand they will turn aside to myths. 5 You, however, be self-controlled in all things, suffer hardship, do an evangelist’s work, fulfill your ministry.

First, in view of the fact we often face resistance, Paul did not just call for complete patience, but complete patience and instruction. The word “complete” really modifies both nouns. The reality of resistance should not send us into the closet or keep us from being willing to either witness or teach or enter into dialog. Instead, such conditions require even more instruction and dialog where possible, but always accompanied by patience. As mentioned in 2 Timothy 4:2 in connection with the command “to preach the word,” Paul also literally said, “stand by,” which means here, “be ready.” Readiness involves spiritual (controlled and led by the Spirit), academic (know what we believe and why), and emotional readiness (operating out of love with patience). Again, we need to know what we believe and why and to be ready to give a verbal defense for our faith or beliefs according to the evidence of the historical facts of the New Testament and the clear teaching of the Word (see 1 Pet. 3:13-16, especially vs. 15) but vital to one’s effectiveness is the spirit in which the communication of the Word is given. The goal is not winning an argument, but winning a soul.

The other passage calling for patience in a witnessing, teaching situation is 2 Timothy 2:24. Here Paul used a very different word, the Greek anexikakos, “bearing evil without resentment, patient.” This noun “… implied in the LXX the quality of patiently affirming a belief in face of mockery (Wis 2:19). It is linked with epieikeia (reasonableness, gentleness). The picture is that of a relentless teacher who firmly overlooks the painful consequences of his affirmations.”99 Again, the context of 2 Timothy 2:24 is one of meeting resistance from those who oppose the truth and have been duped by Satan’s trap and here, anexikakos is linked with prautes, “gentleness, courtesy, humility, considerateness.”100

2 Timothy 2:22-26 But keep away from youthful passions, and pursue righteousness, faithfulness, love, and peace, in company with others who call on the Lord from a pure heart. 23 But reject foolish and ignorant controversies, because you know they breed fights. 24 And the Lord’s slave must not be a fighter but kind toward all, an apt teacher, patient ( anexikakos), 25 correcting opponents with gentleness ( prautes). Perhaps God will grant them repentance and then knowledge of the truth 26 and they will come to their senses and escape the devil’s trap where they are held captive by him to do his will.

As this passage illustrates, coming to repentance and the knowledge of the truth is the work of God and not our skill or methodology. While our responsibility is to present the truth in dependence on the ministry of the Spirit, we also see from this passage that our attitude does play an important role and can be a tool God uses or a hindrance Satan uses in communicating the truth.

The words for enduring or bearing with something or someone are not just used of the responsibility of the messenger, but also of those receiving the message. Often the messenger must exhort his listeners to sound doctrine or to some form of spiritual action that will require submission, obedience, and spiritual change, so the listeners need to bear with the message, endure it in a positive way. So, the author of Hebrews wrote, “Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, bear with ( anechomai) my message of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you briefly” (Heb. 13:22). But sometimes because of the spiritual hardness and indifference that occurs in the hearts of people, they reach a point where they will not bear with sound doctrine. So Paul wrote, “For there will be a time when people will not tolerate ( anechomai) sound teaching. Instead following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves, because they have a craven curiosity to hear new things” (2 Tim. 4:3).

Another interesting passage is 2 Corinthians 11:4. Here Paul used a form of sarcastic irony. “For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus different from the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit than the one you received, or a different gospel than the one you accepted, you put up ( anechomai) with it well enough.”

Here the apostle expressed the incongruity between what might have been expected and what actually occurred because of the way the Corinthians had so easily put up with the false teaching. They listened too willingly to these teachers or error (cf. 2 Cor. 11:19). The point being is that Christians need biblical discernment and should not bear with or put up with any kind of false teaching or teachers.

ENDURANCE, PATIENCE, AND THE COMING OF THE LORD

Finally, the words for endurance and patience are often used in a prophetic or eschatological sense in relation to (1) the coming of the Lord, (2) inheriting the promises of God, and (3) eternal rewards. In such passages we are shown how our eternal hope and the sure promises of God are very much the foundation and the means of patience with people or perseverance under difficult conditions. Hebrews 6:12 illustrates this when it says, “so that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and perseverance ( makrothumia) inherit the promises.” Then, as an illustration, the author pointed to Abraham and wrote, “And so by persevering ( makrothumeo), Abraham inherited the promise” (Heb. 6:15). Moses was willing to leave the treasures of Egypt, “choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin; considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward.” It was the invisible, but very real future reward that gave Moses the capacity to endure ill-treatment with the people of God.

One passage that strongly stresses this prophetic or eschatological element and the way it should impact our ability to endure and show undefined undefinedpatience is James 5:1-11. In this passage, James used makrothumia, “patience” and makrothumeo, “be patient,” but in verse 11 he also used two other words discussed previously, hupomeno “endure” and hupomone, “endurance.”

Before looking at these verses, we should remember that James’ readers were severely afflicted with materialism or the spirit of worldliness (see Jam. 4:1-5). Rather than on the return of the Lord and eternal weight of glory, they were occupied with the details of this life and its comforts. As an evidence of this, they had played favorites with the wealthy (cf. 4:1-4; 2:1f) and were boasting about their profit making schemes to go into this city or that one regardless of God’s will (4:13-17). What the readers needed, therefore, was a strong reminder regarding how transient and impotent human wealth is in the long haul. As the Lord does in Matthew 6:19f, James focuses his readers on the differences between earthly and heavenly treasures.

I agree with Jim Elliff, who has observed that the people who piously care so little about eternal rewards are often killing themselves trying to accumulate a great “reward” now. They profess to be content with a “little shack in heaven,” but want a much bigger one on earth! The Bible teaches that there is nothing wrong with ambition, just as long as we focus it on heaven rather than earth.101

Thus, in 5:1-6, like a prophet of old, James addresses the wealthy of the world who have shown little or no interest in heavenly treasures or spiritual things. Here James looks outward to the world as a whole and its future doom though his purpose is to awaken his readers to the temporary nature and ultimate doom of all human wealth. These verses remind us of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16 which contrasts the state of the rich man and Lazarus after death. The rich man had much throughout his lifetime by way of the world’s wealth and blessing, but had shown no interest in spiritual things while the opposite was true of Lazarus. After death however Lazarus was in the blessed place of Abraham’s bosom and the rich man was in a place of torment.

When was the last time you saw a hearse pulling a U-Haul? We brought nothing into this world, materially speaking, and we will take nothing with us of what we accumulate (see 1 Tim. 6:6-7). We can lay up treasures in heaven that are imperishable, undefiled, and will not fade away (1 Pet. 1:4). Thus, to stir his Christian readers into reality, James first declares the fact of coming judgment (v. 1) and then lists the crimes against which this judgment will be meted out (vv. 2-6). Those crimes are: the hoarding of wealth (vss. 2-3); the failure to pay wages as promised (vs. 4); luxurious living and self-indulgence (vs. 5), and the murder of innocent people (vs. 6). Naturally, all of these illustrate the mentality and behavior of those who are living as mere “earth dwellers,” which is a biblical description of those with no concern for heavenly treasure and the reality of eternity (see Rev. 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 13:8, 14; 17:8; Isa. 24:17f).

Having called attention to these eschatological facts, James then calls his readers to have patience in verses 7-12. First, he gives the essence of patience needed in the life of Christians along with an illustration of the farmer (vss. 7-9). Then with verses 10-11, he gives examples of patience and concludes with what could be considered as an evidence of patience (vs. 12). As Ron Blue has so ably put it,

From the rich, James turned to the restless. For these he again used the friendly address, “brothers.” The tone turns from stark condemnation to sensitive consolation. James excoriated the rich but encouraged the receptive. He appealed to his brethren to be patient. He defined the essence of patience, gave some examples of patience, and indicated an evidence of patience.102

The Essence of Patience (5:7-9).

5:7 “So be patient, brothers and sisters.” With the words “brothers and sisters” (literally, “brethren”) and “so” (literally, “therefore”), James makes a direct inference from the preceding prophetic focus to the Christian community. “Be patient” is an aorist imperative of the verb makrothumeo, which, in this context, carries with it a note of solemn urgency. They were evidently complaining against one another (vs.9) and making unnecessary oaths, perhaps because of their distress (vs.12). “Until the coming of the Lord” pointed the readers and us to the ultimate motivation. The coming ( parousia) of the Lord refers not to the judgment mentioned in verses 1-6, but to His manifestation or appearance to the body of Christ in the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13ff). This includes the Judgment Seat of Christ, the place where every Christian will be examined thoroughly, fairly, and impartially according to the quality of their works (1 Cor. 3:12f; 2 Cor. 5:10-11; Rom. 14:10). This examination will result in either rewards or their loss and these rewards will determine our lot, responsibilities, and privileges for all eternity. This will naturally be followed the glories and other blessings of eternity on which Christians are to set their hope (see 1 Pet. 1:13ff). The plain truth is that the persons we are today will determine the rewards we will receive in eternity.

To illustrate the principle, James turned his reader’s attention to the farmer with the words, “consider (literally, “behold”) the farmer who waits ( ekdechomai, “to wait, expect”) for the precious fruit of the ground being patient about it.” “Being patient” is an adverbial participle of makrothumeo which points us to the means or manner of his waiting. This is immediately followed by the words, “until it (the buried seed) receives the early and latter rains.” Two things enabled the farmer to wait patiently: the confident expectation of the rains which would cause the planted seeds to sprout, grow, and come to harvest, and the valuable fruit at the time of harvest. This illustrates the very essence of patience—the anticipation of the rewards of one’s labor.

5:8 You also be patient and strengthen your hearts, for the Lord’s coming is near. With these words James made the first application to the believer’s life here on earth. Like the farmer who waits for the early and latter rain, so the Christian waits expectantly for the Lord knowing He is not only coming to reward our service, but is near. Also, like the farmer who waits for the precious fruit, so the Christian believes in the eternal value of the fruit of his labor on earth. The Lord’s sure return (parousia) should stimulate every believer to patience and strength of heart. His coming has drawn near in that it is imminent and is the next great prophetical event in the life of the church.

5:9 Do not grumble against one another, brothers and sisters,… With these words, the application becomes more specific. A lack of patience and failing to live in the light of the coming of the Lord often leads to grumbling against others. These Christians were subject to murmuring against those, especially the wealthy, who were oppressing them or treating them unfairly. Life is not fair and we are all subject to mistreatment by others (by Christians and non-Christians alike) whether done consciously or unconsciously. The temptation is to groan or complain against those we think are responsible. “Grumble” is stenazo, “to groan, sigh.” Stenazo may speak of inner distress more than open complaint or grumbling though both may be involved.

What is forbidden is not the loud and bitter denunciation of others but the unexpressed feeling of bitterness or the smothered resentment that may express itself in a groan or a sigh. James uses the Greek me with the present imperative to prohibit the continuation of this hateful practice. To continue it would result in judgment.…103

James quickly adds, “so that you may not be judged. See, the judge stands before the gates!” To continue on their present path of grumbling or sighing against others was a failure to rest in God’s final judgment when He will make all things right. For Christians this is the Judgment Seat of Christ that occurs after the Rapture (1 Thess. 4:13ff) and not the Great White Throne Judgment which occurs at the end of the millennium and is only for unbelievers (Rev. 20:11-15).

Grumbling against others whether expressed inwardly or openly is one means by which people often seek to take matters into their own hands and where, in a sense, they act as judges themselves. To grumble is to fail to live in the certainty of the return of the Lord and to fail to recognize the extreme shortness of this life as James has previously pointed out, “What is your life like? For you are a puff of smoke that appears for a short time and then vanishes.”

Thus, living patiently in view of the Lord’s coming has a double focus here. One anticipates eternal blessing and rewards and the other seeks to avoid the loss of rewards. Behind this focus is the whole subject of the Judgment Seat (the Bema) of Christ. This is a subject that is rather extensive in the New Testament, but unfortunately, very little teaching is devoted to it in spite of the many passages that deal with rewards or their loss in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus spoke of rewards some 16 plus times in the Gospels (cf. Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 19-21; 18; 10:41, 42; 16:27; 18; 25, 26, 29) and Paul spoke of this truth over and over again. One illustration is his word to slaves in Colossians 3:22-25.

3:22 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in every respect; not only when they are watching—like those who are strictly people-pleasers—but with a sincere heart, fearing the Lord. 3:23 Whatever you are doing, work at it with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not for people, 3:24 because you know that you will receive your inheritance from the Lord as the reward (literally, “the reward of your inheritance”). Serve the Lord Christ. 3:25 For the one who does wrong will be repaid for his wrong, and there are no exceptions (i.e., no partiality with the Lord).

Slaves were to serve their masters and all Christians are to do their work as a service to the Lord. Being devoted to Christ and doing our work as an obedience to Him will result in rewards at the Bema seat of Christ. The principle is that slaves (and so workers today) could accept unjust treatment because of the assurance Christ would reward them in the future with heavenly treasures if they served as an obedience to Him without grumbling, etc. But the opposite is also a fact of life. If one does wrong (retaliates, does his work half-heartedly, murmurs, etc.), he will be repaid for the wrong done (loss of rewards).

Living with patience and endurance rather than grumbling is truly connected with how well we live in view of the return of the Lord Jesus, the Judge of the Bema. When soloist George Beverley Shea was asked what he would like to be when Christ returned, he said, “On pitch!”104 If He finds us grumbling under our breath, we certainly won’t be on pitch. The Lord Jesus has taught us that wise servants live watchfully for their master’s arrival. He says.

Luke 12:35-38 “Get dressed for service and keep your lamps burning; 12:36 be like men waiting for their master to come back from the wedding celebration, so that when he comes and knocks they can open the door for him immediately. 12:37 Blessed are those slaves whom their master finds alert when he comes! I tell you the truth, he will dress himself for serving and have them take their place at the table, and he will come and serve them! 12:38 Even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night and finds them alert, blessed are those slaves.

Examples of Patience (5:10-11)

Having used the farmer to show the essence of patience, James then turned to the authoritative Old Testament, to God’s Word, to give two key examples of those who experienced affliction, but who did so with patience and endurance—the prophets and Job.

5:10 As an example of suffering and patience, brothers and sisters, take the prophets who spoke in the Lord’s name.

James calls attention to the prophets as those who spoke in the Lord’s name. This addition points them out as servants of the Lord who faithfully proclaimed His Word regardless of the various circumstances of affliction they received. How could they do it? Because they did so with patience knowing that in the long run, the Lord would make things right.

Although James refers to “the prophets” as a group, Jeremiah certainly stands out as one who endured mistreatment with patience. He was put in the stocks (Jer 20:2) thrown into prison (32:2), and lowered into a miry dungeon (38:6); yet he persisted in his ministry without bitterness or recrimination. Such men constitute a model (hypodeigma) for believers who are oppressed and mistreated.105

5:11 Behold, we count those blessed who endured. You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings, that the Lord is full of compassion and is merciful. (NASB)

James then turned to Job, another well-known and respected Old Testament example of one who endured great suffering. Only now, rather than use patience, the makrothumia family of words concerning Job, James switched to the use of hupomeno and hupomone. Job is one who persevered with great endurance, but he grew demanding over time—he was impatient with God! Nevertheless, the Lord honored Job’s perseverance with multiplied blessings at the end of his suffering (cf. Job 42:12) and this is the point—God blessed Job for his endurance. Thus, James summed it all up with the words, “The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.” Our patience and endurance will not be forgotten because of the very nature of God as compassionate and merciful.

The Evidence of Patience (5:12)

5:12 And above all, my brothers and sisters, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath. But let your “Yes” be yes and your “No” be no, so that you may not fall into judgment.

It is when people are under stress that they are often inclined to human strategies to deal with their problems. Evidently, with James’ audience, one such solution was the use language that is inappropriate like swearing an oath. “For those who truly demonstrate the persistence and patience prescribed for believers, there is no need to invoke an oath, whether by heaven or by earth, that their word is certain.”106

May we not lose sight of is the important place the sure and imminent coming of the Lord and the realities that accompany and follow it must play in maintaining both endurance and patience. For more on this whole emphasis, see the author’s study on the Doctrine of the Judgments and Rewards on our web site. Also, a tremendously helpful book on this is Erwin Lutzer’s book, Triumph and Tears at the Judgment Seat of Christ: Your Eternal Reward, Moody Press, Chicago, 1998. This book is a must!

Conclusion

My wife and I were recently faced with an experience that illustrates some of the issues in endurance and patience. In June of this year (1999), my beautiful and faithful wife of forty years was diagnosed with extreme osteoporosis which, as it turned out, was caused multiple myeloma (cancer of the plasma cells and bone marrow). My wife’s oncologist prescribed a very powerful drug administered by IV to help rebuild bone but this made her very sick and caused extreme pain. As a result, her primary physician referred her to a bone specialist to see if there was another medication that she could tolerate better. We arrived at 3 p.m. for her appointment and within a few minutes were taken to an exam room to wait for the doctor. My wife was having a great deal of pain in her spine and hip when we arrived so we naturally hoped the doctor would be on time. At 4:15, we still had not seen the doctor. This was testing my wife’s ability to endure the pain, but also our patience with the doctor. As we waited, I began to think some negative thoughts like, “Why can’t he run his office more efficiently? Is he one of those doctors who crowds in too many patients and then spends only a few minutes with them?” But because of his reputation and my wife’s need, we endured and sought to be patient by God’s grace.

Finally, the doctor came in. As it turned out, he had been delayed because of an emergency and was caring for someone in great need. We were so thankful that our wait had been well worth it! The doctor was caring, concerned, careful, and extremely thorough in his evaluation of my wife’s records. In addition, he demonstrated that he was on the cutting edge of many issues that concerned her problems. In essence, her consultation with this doctor was more than worth the long wait. Knowing this beforehand would certainly have made it easier to endure patiently.

Our experience reminds us of two truths. First, we need to endure life’s pressures and be patient with others because, as with this doctor, we don’t know what is going on behind the scenes. Remember, though Job endured, he became somewhat demanding and impatient with what God was doing, but there were things going on behind the scenes—the conflict with Satan—about which Job was totally in the dark. Interestingly, when God did deal with Job’s impatience, He still never told Job about the issues of chapters 1 and 2. Job just needed to learn to rest in the sovereign God of the universe. Second, our capacity for patience strongly depends on our confidence in God’s person and eternal purposes. Though the doctor was not, he could have been a great disappointment, but the Lord Jesus, the great physician and sovereign all-wise Lord, can never let us down. So, as James told his readers, we are to strengthen our hearts because the Lord’s coming is near (Jam. 5:8). When He comes, he will wipe away every tear, right every wrong, and reward every faithfulness.

Endurance and patience give us the capacity to plod on with joyous, hopeful, and loving determination in spite of disappointments, rejection, persecution, and other pressures that might otherwise cause us to throw in the towel. These two qualities give us the willingness and capacity to continue on because of a hope fixed on God’s person as one who is compassionate and merciful, and on God’s purposes and eternal rewards.

The apostle Paul, as with all the apostles, suffered tremendous hardships for the sake of Christ and their calling in the ministry of the gospel. He was deserted, maligned, imprisoned, beaten, stoned: you name it, he suffered it! Yet Paul never gave up. He was what one might call a plodder (see 2 Tim. 1:15-16; 4:10; and cf. 2 Cor. 10:10 with 11:6, 23-28 ). This demonstrated the staying power of great maturity throughout his life right up to his death.

Howard Hendricks, a well-known conference speaker, teacher at Dallas Seminary, and leader of men, once looked out over a audience of young Campus Crusade for Christ trainees and commented, “Gentlemen, I’m not impressed.” His point, as he went on to explain, was that he would only be impressed if they were still committed to ministry and the service of the Savior forty years later. The race God has called us to is tough. One hundred yard dashers won’t make it. This truth is classically illustrated for us in the life of Paul. In 2 Timothy 4:7 toward the close of Paul’s life, Paul could make three statements that we should all pray that we will be able to make. But Paul made these statements and they were true of him because he saw his life as a drink offering, a sacrifice poured out for the Savior and because he lived with a view to heavenly treasures. I believe it was this underlying commitment and mental attitude that gave him his staying power.

He wrote: “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith.” In each of these verbs, the apostle used the perfect tense which may emphasize the results (intensive perfect) from the standpoint of the author or the completion of action or a process (consummative perfect). In view of the statement that follows both concepts are in view though the emphasis is on the fact of the completion of his work on earth. But with its completion, in view of the Lord’s sure return and reward, Paul quickly added, “in the future there is laid up for me (i.e., as an abiding result), the crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day.”

By the use of the term fought with the perfect tense, there is a sense of finality with victory. The battle was over and now he faced the rewards of eternity. This also reminds us, however, that life and especially our ministries involve us in a life-and-death struggle. God never said it would be easy and we should never expect it to be so. Discipleship is costly. The tendency is to give in, to throw in the towel, but to have fought the good fight is to have continued to fight courageously and bravely regardless of the opponents.

To this element of finality there is the added emphasis of completion with the word “I have finished the course.” The word “finished,” the Greek, teleo, means “to finish, complete, arrive a the goal.” Again, this word plus the perfect tense lays strong emphasis on the idea of completion and the fact that this life is temporary, but it does has eternal ramifications. With the words “the course” (literally “the race”), the apostle pictures God’s plan for his life as a race to be run. It pointed to the ministry God ordained for Paul with all the hurdles and obstacles that were a part of the course laid out for him. And it is no different for any of us. This is brought out in Hebrews 12:1-2, but we must keep our eyes on the Savior and on the finish line.

Paul was a plodder. He never gave up because of the hurdles; he persevered. He was a man driven by eternal values and biblical objectives.

“I have kept the faith.” The word “kept” is the Greek, tereo, which means “to protect, guard,” but in this context it means, “to remain faithful to” something. That something is “the faith,” the body of revealed truth, the Word. Paul kept the faith in three senses: He kept the Word near his heart—it was his source of comfort and strength; he was obedient to it; and he passed it on to others. He remained faithful and true to the faith, i.e., to the challenges and responsibilities that living and preaching the faith brought upon his life as a servant of God and of men.

But we might think about why the apostle made these statements? He was writing to Timothy to encourage him to patiently endure, to keep him joyfully plodding on in the race God had laid out for this young man. This encouragement to endure or persevere is an element found throughout this pastoral book, a book that calls for maturity and leadership.

Well, just how does Paul seek to promote this endurance? Throughout 2 Timothy Paul used one means after another to teach and encourage perseverance or endurance. He challenged, commanded, instructed, reminded, warned, and illustrated the need of endurance both negatively and positively. But why so much on endurance? Because, as just mentioned, a lot of people and even churches are great starters; they are good in the hundred-yard dash, but they are no good in the endurance events. Life and the ministry is an endurance event, indeed, it’s a marathon if not a decathlon!

Session 13

1. Using your standard dictionary, please define:

Endurance

Perseverance

Patience

2. How does endurance differ from perseverance?

3. In New Testament terms, what is associated with patience?

4. What is associated with endurance and perseverance?

5. In Hebrews 12:1, the writer teaches us that we have a “great cloud of witnesses surrounding us”. These witnesses are cited in Hebrews 11. In your own words, describe the endurance, perseverance, and patience of the following:

Noah

Abraham

Moses

6. What trait is found in each one of these witnesses?

7. In Hebrews 12:1-3, we are told to “run with endurance the race that is set before us”. What example does the writer give us and why?

8. How does the writer link discipline with endurance (vv. 4-7)?

9. Read 2 Timothy 4:5-8

What encouragement is Paul giving to Timothy?

As Paul nears his “departure”, what allows him to persevere?

10. Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

How is love connected to patience?

What fruit of patient love is mentioned in these verses?

11. Read James 5:7-11

With what does James compare patience for the Lord’s return?

What does he warn them will happen if they lose patience and complain about each another?

Who does he use as an example to encourage them in patience?

What example does he use for endurance?

12. What challenges or hardships are you enduring as a follower of Jesus Christ?

13. What hardships are you are trying to endure in which the goal is an earthly reward?

14. Describe situations in which you doubt you will persevere?

15. Write down the initials of fellow Christians with whom you have little or no patience and the reasons.

16. What will you do to love them as Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13?

GROUP DISCUSSION

The apostle Paul was driven by eternal values and biblical objectives. How can you acquire that same drive and cultivate biblical perseverance and patience to finish your race?

NPS Bible Study Lesson 6

MARKS OF MATURITY: BIBLICAL CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER

Mark #13: Having Courage and Being an Encourager

Introduction

The Prussian king Frederick the Great was widely known as an agnostic. By contrast, General Von Zealand, one of his most trusted officers, was a devout Christian. Thus it was that during a festive gathering the king began making crude jokes about Christ until everyone was rocking with laughter—all but Von Zealand, that is. Finally, he arose and addressed the king:

“Sire, you know I have not feared death. I have fought and won 38 battles for you. I am an old man; I shall soon have to go into the presence of One greater than you, the mighty God who saved me from my sin, the Lord Jesus Christ whom you are blaspheming. I salute you, sire, as an old man who loves his Savior, on the edge of eternity.”

The place went silent, and with a trembling voice the king replied, “General Von Zealand—I beg your pardon! I beg your pardon!”

And with that the party quietly ended.

It took courage for General Von Zealand to stand and proclaim his allegiance to the Savior in circumstances like that, but of course, here was a man who was no stranger to courage. One of the required character qualities in any leader is courage. “Courage of the highest order is demanded of a spiritual leader—always moral courage and frequently physical courage as well.” But courage is not only a necessary quality in a leader, it is a quality needed in every Christian’s life if he or she is going to be able to boldly follow and persist in the will of God. Ultimately it becomes a mark of maturity where it is consistently evident. Oftentimes pursuing the will of God calls on the Christian to take a stand that may put him or her at risk, at least emotionally if not physically or financially or socially or politically.

In the New Testament, Joseph of Arimathea provides a good illustration of one who gained courage as he grew in his knowledge of the Savior:

Mark 15:43 Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. (NASB)

According to Matthew 27:57, Joseph was a wealthy and reputable member of the Council, a non-Jewish designation used by Mark for the Jewish Sanhedrin. Though a member of the Sanhedrin, Luke 23:51 tells us that he had not approved of the Sanhedrin’s decision to put Jesus to death. Further, in both Mark 15:43 and Luke 23:51, we are told that Joseph was personally waiting for the kingdom of God. This suggests he was a devout Pharisee who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Previously, however, according to John 19:38, Joseph had been a secret disciple who had feared the Jewish authorities. In other words, up to that point, he lacked courage.

But seeing the death of the Savior, a monumental evidence of who He was—the Son of God bearing the sin of the world—Joseph gathered up his courage and went boldly to Pilate. “Gathered up his courage” is a translation of the Greek tolmao, “to dare, have courage, be bold, be brave enough.” Joseph’s behavior was seen as an act of courage by Mark because:

(a) he was not related to Jesus; (b) his request was a favor that would likely be denied on principle since Jesus had been executed for treason; (c) he risked ceremonial defilement in handling a dead body; (d) his request amounted to an open confession of personal loyalty to the crucified Jesus which would doubtless incur his associates’ hostility. He was a secret disciple no longer—something Mark impressed on his readers.108

As with all the other qualities of maturity and leadership, the Lord Jesus is our greatest example of courage. While none of the words used in the New Testament for acting courageously or boldly are specifically used of Jesus, He is still the epitome of courage as one who followed the will of God in the face of the greatest hostility and antagonism. Though He was deeply troubled when he was facing the cross where He (the sinless one) would bear the sin of the world, He courageously committed Himself to the will of the Father.

John 12:27-28 “Now my soul is greatly distressed. And what should I say? ‘Father, deliver me from this hour’? No, but for this very reason I have come to this hour. 28 Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.”

Jesus drew his courage from His faith in His purpose and in what the Father had promised to do. Thus, resting completely in the victory He would accomplish to defeat Satan, the world, and sin, He not only went boldly to the cross, but that’s not all. Just hours before His arrest, Jesus also sought to be an encourager and impart courage to His disciples:

John 16:33 I have told you these things so that in me you may have peace. In the world you have trouble and suffering; but have courage, I have conquered (overcome) the world.

As it relates to courage, there are a couple of powerful lessons here. First, Jesus gave us an example of courage and of the need for us to become encouragers. Right after demonstrating His own love and courage, He called upon His disciples to be courageous in the face of the many pressures, afflictions, and challenges they would face as His disciples in a hostile world. In doing so, He shows us that mature Christ-likeness seeks to impart courage to others as an encourager regardless of what one might be facing himself. Let us never forget that when we go through the fire, others are watching. May we be reminded that God is committed to reproducing in us the character of Jesus Christ. The qualities we see in His life in the Word are the very ones God want to reproduce in us and this will require suffering at times. Spiritual growth and greatness in God’s kingdom does not come through ease and luxury as those promoting the health and wealth gospel claim. Rather, it comes through pain and tears, tools God uses to draw us closer and closer to Himself. Even the Lord Jesus was perfected by the things which He suffered.

Hebrews 5:7-10 During his earthly life he offered both requests and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his devotion. 5:8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience through the things he suffered. 5:9 And by being perfected in this way, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, 5:10 and he was designated by God as “high priest in the order of Melchizedek.”

But there is a second and important truth in John 16:33. With the words, “I have conquered the world,” Jesus points us to the basis for courage. Against whatever we might face in this life, our capacity for courage rests in the historical events of the person, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ who now sits enthroned at the right hand of the Father. Here is the Christian’s basis for ultimate victory; Christ’s victory is the foundation for courage and the ability to live victoriously in life. It was to this end that the apostle prayed for the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:18b-22, but note especially verses 20-22.

… so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 1:19 and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength. 1:20 This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms 1:21 far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 1:22 And God put all things under Christ’s feet and he gave him to the church as head over all things (Ephesians 1:18b-22).

Again, the Lord Jesus is our example, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. He is both our example for being courageous and becoming encouragers, and He is the basis for courage

The Meaning and Nature of Courage

COURAGE AND FEARLESSNESS

The Original Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases lists boldness and fearlessness as synonyms of courage, but courage often exists in spite of the presence of fear.109 In fact, it is probably true that courage is doing what one is afraid to do. Indeed, courage is the capacity to resist fear, to master it, not its absence. Thus, courage is that quality of the heart or mind that gives one the ability to encounter danger and difficulty with firmness and resolve in spite of the presence of fear. “Courage is being scared to death but saddling up anyway.”110

The apostle Paul was not one who courted danger nor did he presume upon the Lord. As one who tenaciously pursued the will of God, Paul was always willing to move forward into danger if he was convinced it was God’s will or that it was right even though his heart might have been gripped with fear.

1 Corinthians 2:1-2 When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come with superior eloquence or wisdom as I proclaimed the testimony of God. 2 For I decided to be concerned about nothing among you except Jesus Christ, as one who had been crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. (emphasis mine)

2 Corinthians 7:5 For even when we came into Macedonia, our body had no rest at all, but we were troubled in every way—struggles from the outside, fears from within. (emphasis mine)

Sanders writes,

Martin Luther possessed this important quality in unusual measure. It has been asserted that he was perhaps as fearless a man as ever lived. When he set out on his momentous journey to Worms, he said, “you can expect from me everything except fear or recantation. I shall not flee, much less recant.” His friends, warning him of the grave dangers he faced, sought to dissuade him. But Luther would not be dissuaded. “Not go to Worms!” he said. “I shall go to Worms though there were as many devils as tiles on the roofs.”

… But not all men are courageous by nature as Luther was, and that fact is both explicit and implicit in Scripture. The highest degree of courage is seen in the person who is most fearful but refuses to capitulate to it. However fearful they might have been, God’s leaders in succeeding generations have been commanded to be of good courage. Had they been without fear, the command would have been pointless…”111

COURAGE AND MATURITY

As we saw with Joseph of Arimathea, courage is very much a part of spiritual growth and maturity because it is so vital to other qualities of Christ-like character. Speaking of the Lord Jesus, John wrote, “He had loved his own who were in the world, and now he loved them to the very end” (John. 13:1). But without the courage to face the horrors of the cross, He could not have loved them, and us, to the end or to the uttermost, the cross.

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Courage is not simply one of the virtues but the form of every virtue at the testing point, which means at the point of highest reality.”112 Without courage, men and women will fail to be loving, to sacrifice, to count the cost, to tackle the challenges or take on the responsibilities that God calls them to.

Undoubtedly, one cause of remaining immature and one of the shortest routes to ineffectiveness is to run scared, to be overly cautious, to play it close to the vest. Unless, through the courage of faith, we are willing to saddle up, we will simply remain in the corral and miss the growth experiences and fruitfulness of the open range.

How much better to take on a few ornery bears and lions, like David did. They ready us for giants like Goliath. How much more thrilling to step out into the Red Sea like Moses and watch God part the waters.… How much more interesting to set sail for Jerusalem, like Paul, “not knowing what will happen to me there,” than to spend one’s days in monotonous Miletus, listening for footsteps and watching dull sunsets. Guard your heart from over protection.

Happily, not all have opted for safety. Some have overcome, regardless of the risks. Some have merged into greatness despite adversity. They refuse to listen to their fears…113

Frankly, courage is learning to tell our fears where to get off, not just so we can be brave but so we can courageously face the hurdles and continue on in the race God has laid out before us. Otherwise, there will be little or no progress in growth and little or no fruitfulness here in time and for eternity.

The Means and Source

of Courage or Encouragement

Naturally, the question arises, where do the courageous get their courage? Or how do we develop the quality of courage in ourselves and in others? How can we learn to tell our fears to get lost? Some men might naturally be more courageous than others, as might have been the case with Martin Luther. But even with Luther, his courage was primarily a product of his biblical convictions and undauntable faith.

Needing courage or to be encouraged is one of the common experiences we all face as finite human beings, and we should never think it odd if we reach a place where we need to be encouraged. Such is clearly evident from Scripture itself where we often find the people of God in circumstances where they needed to be encouraged. Thus, Paul wrote:

2 Corinthians 7:5-7 For even when we came into Macedonia, our body had no rest at all, but we were troubled in every way—struggles from the outside, fears from within. 7:6 But God, who encourages the downhearted, encouraged us by the arrival of Titus. 7:7 We were encouraged not only by his arrival, but also by the encouragement you gave him, as he reported to us your longing, your mourning, your deep concern for me, so that I rejoiced more than ever.

Facing a variety of troubles from within and without and experiencing fear and disappointment is a part of life though we do need to find courage to go forward. Thus, both finding courage to go forward when fearful, when life seems impossible and the road impassable, and giving encouragement to the discouraged or fearful is an important focus in Scripture. Courage comes from being encouraged. So what does the word encourage mean?

To encourage means give support in order “to inspire with hope, courage, or confidence.” In just the New Testament alone, the terms “encourage” or “encouragement” are found 23 times in the NET Bible and 21 times in the NASB, and “be courageous” or “be strong and courageous” and “take courage” are found numerous times in the whole of Scripture (cf. Deut. 31:6, 7, 23; Josh. 1:6-9, 18; 10:35; Mark 6:50; John 16:33; Acts 23:1).

So, how may we define encouragement biblically speaking? In the light of the whole of Scripture, we might define encouragement as follows:

Encouragement is finding (or helping others to find) the courage, by God’s grace and strength, to run the race He has laid out before us no matter how difficult or painful the course.

Everyone can become discouraged over conditions or lack courage to take on a responsibility or face a daunting task or a trial. Fortunately, we have a loving Lord who, having given His all for us, is committed to our need which includes our encouragement. Thankfully, He has numerous ways or tools He uses to encourage His people. Thus, what are some of the ways God gives courage or encouragement?

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF SCRIPTURE AND THE PROMISES OF GOD

Of all the sources of encouragement, the Scripture is one of our greatest—if not the greatest source of encouragement. God’s holy Word with its many principles and promises is our most important and fundamental source of encouragement because it is God’s special and authoritative revelation to us of both Himself and His plan of salvation in Christ.

Let us remember that all of the principles and promises of the Bible are based on the character and being of God’s person and His historical acts in salvation just as He has promised. For instance, the book of Deuteronomy contains Moses’ instruction given during the final months of his life. The setting for this is significant. The new generation was encamped in the plains of Moab prior to their entrance into the Promised Land. They were facing fortified cities and warring people, some of whom were giants. As they entered this new land there would also be many temptations and a whole new way of life. And all of this was to take place under the leadership of Joshua who at that time was unproved, at least as Moses replacement. Further, this new generation had not personally experienced the deliverance out of Egypt or at the Red Sea or the giving of the Law at Sinai. Thus, if they were to have the courage needed to face the difficulties before them, they needed to be reminded of God’s person and his historical acts of deliverance. So Moses wrote these words in Deuteronomy 6.

“When your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD our God commanded you?’ 21 then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; and the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand. 22 ‘Moreover, the LORD showed great and distressing signs and wonders before our eyes against Egypt, Pharaoh and all his household; 23 and He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land which He had sworn to our fathers.’ (emphasis mine) (Deuteronomy 6:20-23)

Another illustration is Solomon’s prayer of dedication when the temple was completed. There, remembering God’s historical acts of faithfulness, he wrote regarding the nation of Israel:

53 “For Thou has separated them from all the peoples of the earth as Your inheritance, as You spoke through Moses Your servant, when You brought our fathers forth from Egypt, O Lord God.” 54 And it came about that when Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven. 55 And he stood and blessed all the assembly of Israel with a loud voice, saying, 56 “Blessed be the Lord, who has given rest to His people Israel, according to all that He promised; not one word has failed of all His good promise, which He promised through Moses His servant.

Thus, it is this God-breathed, inerrant, and infallible revelation of God in Scripture that provides us with the greatest means of courage.

ROMANS 15:4

For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope.

In this verse, the apostle stated a vital truth concerning the purpose and ministry of the Scripture. The Scripture is designed to encourage us so that we might have hope. “Encouragement” is the Greek paraklesis, which has a rather broad field of use. Depending on the context, it may mean “exhortation, encouragement, appeal, request, comfort.” Paraklesis and its verb form parakaleo may have a prospective appeal in the sense of an exhortation or appeal for “obedience” or some form of positive “response” (Rom. 12:1, 8). But it also had a retrospective appeal in the sense of “comfort, encourage” in the face of burdens, afflictions, etc. (Acts 20:2; 1 Cor. 14:3; 2 Cor. 7:4). As God’s people we need both, but the focus in Romans 15:4 with the word “hope” is that of encouragement or gaining the courage to move forward in the will of God.

As Romans 15:4 teaches us, our ability to find encouragement from Scripture comes through its instruction. It is the Scripture as God’s special, inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word that informs us about the nature and being of our God. Here we learn about His person,114 His plan of salvation and sanctification (past, present, and future), His purposes in both time and eternity, the principles by which God and His plan operate, and His many promises of salvation, love, grace, mercy, and sovereign care. Included in this revelation is the promise of His impartial discipline and judgment against sin and His rewards for faithfulness. A good illustration of God’s promises based on the character of God is Deuteronomy 31:7-8, but perhaps the classic passage is Joshua 1:6-9

JOSHUA 1:6-9

6 Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. 7 “Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. 8 “This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success. 9 “Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous! Do not tremble or be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

In Joshua 1:1-5, Joshua is commissioned by the LORD Himself to become the leader of Israel after the death of Moses. To say the least, this was a daunting task because the nation of Israel had been an extremely difficult people to lead, a fact all too well known by Joshua who had been Moses’ military general in the field. Now God was calling Joshua to be the new leader of this very nation. From the repetition of the words “be strong and courageous” or “be very courageous” and the exhortation against trembling and becoming dismayed, it seems obvious the LORD knew that Joshua, as brave and as faithful as he had been, would still face hesitation and fear in stepping into the shoes of Moses to lead this rebellious nation into the land, a land of giants and fortified cities.

Thus, the Lord carefully sought to encourage Joshua. But it is significant that Joshua’s encouragement to his commission proceeds out of God’s personal communication, i.e., His revelation to Joshua. In fact, verses 1-18 are all related to this revelation from God. First, God speaks and commissions Joshua (1:1-5) and then calls him to be strong and courageous in light of God’s promises (1:6-9). Second, in view of this word from God, Joshua speaks to the people and gives them instructions for preparing to cross the Jordan in three days (1:10-15). This is followed by the response of the people to these instructions which, of course, had its source in the Word of God (1:16-18). Thus, God’s revelation, which is equivalent to our possession of the Bible today, became the source of courage for both Joshua and the people.

Joshua 1:1-9 can be divided into a four-fold source of encouragement for Joshua. In this we learn of four fundamental principles that are vital to courage and encouragement:

(1) Strength and courage come through recognizing and relating to God’s pleasure, His will or having a sense of God’s calling and destiny (1:1-2). With the words “the Lord spoke to Joshua” in verse one we see the principle of revelation from God—biblical insight. It is this that forms the foundation for courage and conviction for faith and action. Our need is to pray and seek God’s will and wisdom from His Word because the foundation for courage is knowing the Word which enlightens us to His will. In addition it is also helpful to recognize our gifts, abilities, and training because this is an important part of preparation, ability, and the necessary confidence to do His pleasure or will. Again, the process is significant here: in verse 1 God speaks—we have revelation from God to Joshua. Then, based on this revelation, Joshua speaks to the people (vs.10). Thus, the courage that is called for here for both Joshua and the people is in part the direct result of the Word and knowing God’s will (see Eph. 5:9-10).

“Joshua” means “the Lord (Yahweh) is salvation.” Joshua’s very name was designed to remind him and Israel that the battle is the Lord’s. Courage comes from knowing this and resting in the Lord as the source of our deliverance and ability for ministry and life.

The next thing we read about Joshua is that he was “Moses’ servant.” Being the servant of Moses illustrates the principle of Luke 16:10-12 and its impact on the development of character and the courage to accept the will and call of God. Though Luke 16:10-12 deals with material blessings, the principle is applicable in other areas of responsibility in life.

Luke 16:10 “The one who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much; and the one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you haven’t been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will entrust you with the true riches? 12 And if you haven’t been trustworthy with someone else’s property, who will give you your own?

The principle of these verses certainly has an application on the development of courage. Courage for service in the larger and more difficult areas of responsibility start with faithfulness in the smaller and less difficult areas. Everyone needs to find a place to serve and grow because normally that becomes the training ground for greater responsibilities and other areas of ministry God may be calling us to.

“Moses my servant is dead” (vs. 2). This fact reminds us that no one is indispensable and leadership changes. If we aren’t training others, we leave gaping holes. We need to be trained ourselves and involved in the process of training others. Effective training is another source of courage because it gives people the confidence to take on responsibility or accept a difficult task.

The command to “arise” emphasizes the need for decisiveness and action. Courage manifests itself in decisiveness and action as root to fruit. Israel was then in the desert and God doesn’t want us in the desert, the place of fear, cowardice, and defeat. The background for this is Numbers 13-14.

But there is another element that is vital to courage and decisiveness in doing the will of God.

(2) Strength and courage come through resting in God’s promises (1:2b-6). To grasp Joshua’s need for courage and to appreciate God’s promises here, we must first take a look at some of the obstacles to God’s commission to Joshua:

The first obstacle is seen the command to “cross this Jordan.” The Jordan river represents a huge obstacle and an impediment to growth, ministry, and progress. There is good reason to believe that the Jordan was swollen out of its banks at this time of the year (cf. Jos. 3:15; 4:18). Further, to cross the Jordan meant to enter into a hostile land, a land full of enemies some of whom were giants and many of whom lived in strongly fortified cities. This was no simple challenge. Remember, the previous generation failed at Kadesh Barnea because they lacked courage to face these very giants.

A second obstacle is seen in the statement, “you and all this people.” This was no small group and the very numbers made this a colossal task. Furthermore, Joshua had the responsibility of leading a people who were noted for being stiff-necked and who threw stones at their leaders. But more importantly, the word “all” reminds us that it is God’s purpose for all His people to move into His will, i.e., to mature and become strong, and to live productively in the will of God.

Nevertheless, regardless of the obstacles, God’s will had been clearly made known to Joshua and he needed to act on this fact.

Now, a brief look at the promises:

There are several promises in verses 2-3, 5, 6, 9, but because of space, we will focus on only two: “To the land which I am giving to them, to the sons of Israel (vs.2),” and “Every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given to them, just as I spoke to Moses (vs. 3).” They were going into the Promised Land, to the land God Himself had personally promised to the patriarchs—to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And God, who is immutable, cannot go back on His promises. In fact, God had for some time been preparing the inhabitants for defeat (cf. 2:9f). The land had been theirs for forty years and they had failed to enter in because of unbelief and a lack of courage.

The principle is that God’s Word is filled with hundreds of promises. While many of these are not directly given to the church today, they do illustrate principles that are often applicable to us. In addition, every principle of Scripture ultimately becomes a promise since God’s veracity stands behind the principle. Our need is to know the promises and principles and act on them by faith. These are given to carry us through the Jordan rivers of life—not necessarily remove them. They are not given so we can avoid or go around, but so we can cross them through the enablement God gives us.

But how do we claim and act on these many promises? How do we make these promises a part of our thinking processes?

(3) Strength and courage come through daily renewal in God’s principles (1:7-8). Successful ministry is always related to successful Bible study. The Word is intrinsically powerful and able to produce godly change in believers’ lives as it motivates, encourages, gives hope and direction, and exposes us to both our needs and God’s will and provision. The Word has been given to us to establish a communicative relationship with God. It is a means of fellowship with Him.

But this takes time, quality time and diligence. Note the emphasis on this in these verses. “To do according to all the Law…; do not turn from it…” (vs. 7), and “but you shall meditate on it day and night…” (vs. 8). In keeping with the mentality of our age, the average person today wants a quick fix, an immediate solution or three easy steps. Bible study may involve reading something like the Daily Bread (a helpful and commendable pattern), but this alone is not enough. We also need ‘meat and potatoes’ Bible study. If our Bible study consists of short devotionals we can’t develop a deep understanding of Scripture or a strong biblical faith with life-changing results. Relationship with God, knowing Him, as with any relationship, takes time. It is this deeper relationship and knowledge that provides us with deep biblical convictions and the capacity to have the kind of courage that results in life-changing results and faithfulness in ministry and in life.

(4) Strength and courage come through reckoning on God’s person and presence (1:9). Last, but certainly not least is the promise of the ever-watchful and protective presence of God. This verse focused Joshua on two great principles of God’s Word. First, in the words, “Have not I commanded you,” the focus is on the source of these commands and promises—God’s Person. Who had commanded Joshua? It was no less than Yahweh, the eternal, independent, and sovereign God of the universe who is the God of revelation and redemption, the One who revealed Himself and called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans, who gave him the Abrahamic Covenant, and who later delivered this nation, Abraham’s descendents, from the destroying angel in Egypt and rolled back the Red Sea. Similarly, in the New Testament, our call to courage and the basis of our encouragement is the accomplished victory of Christ who now sits at God’s right hand as the victorious Savior.

Ephesians 1:17-23 I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you spiritual wisdom and revelation in your growing knowledge of him, 1:18 —since the eyes of your heart have been enlightened—so that you may know what is the hope of his calling, what is the wealth of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 1:19 and what is the incomparable greatness of his power toward us who believe, as displayed in the exercise of his immense strength. 1:20 This power he exercised in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms 1:21 far above every rule and authority and power and dominion and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. 1:22 And God put all things under Christ’s feet and he gave him to the church as head over all things. 1:23 Now the church is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

The second focus of verse 9, seen in the promise, “for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go,” points us to God’s Presence. For those who know God and are related to Him by faith in the Savior, there is no situation, no problem or enemy that they can or will ever face alone. The Lord is always there as the believer’s constant support and supply. Thus, to his readers who were facing difficult trials and persecution, the author of Hebrews quoted the Old Testament and wrote, “for he has said, ‘I will never leave you and I will never abandon you.’ So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5b-6).

If we are concerned about the ministries God has called us to or about the Jordans He has called us to cross, we can be absolutely sure that God is infinitely more concerned for our needs than we are. “Indeed, he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). “And God will exalt you in due time, if you humble yourselves under his mighty hand, by casting all your cares on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6-7).

So, what’s our need? Our need is simply to walk in the light of His person and presence and to count on His sovereign support, guidance, supply, and care through keeping our focus on Him (Heb. 12:1-2).

THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

ACTS 9:31

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and thus was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

It is difficult to determine just how this passage should be translated because of the two Greek participles following the statement, “experienced peace.” Nearly all the versions translate it somewhat differently, but the translation in the margin of the NET Bible seems to fit both the context and the wording of the Greek text best. The margin notes read, “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace. Strengthened and living in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” The peace was a result of Paul’s conversion which also led to his departure from the area because of danger to his life. But this time of calm after the storm of persecution was not wasted. It was used as a means of spiritual and physical growth. During this time, the church was strengthened or edified, built up spiritually, undoubtedly through the teaching of the Word (see Col. 2:6-8; 1 Cor. 14:3). It also continued to live in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit. “The fear of the Lord” is surely a reference to a holy respect for God who, as seen with Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), must sometimes discipline His people to promote holiness and faithfulness. “The encouragement of the Holy Spirit” refers to the ministry of the Spirit who, as the Spirit of Truth, uses the teaching of the Word to bring courage and comfort to the church and growth in the character of Christ, transforming believers into His likeness.

The companion truth here is that it takes both the teaching of the Word and the enabling ministry of the Spirit to bring encouragement and comfort. The Holy Spirit is called the parakletos, variously translated “the Comforter” or “the Helper” or, as I prefer, “the Enabler” (see John 14:16. 26; 15:26; 16:17). So interestingly, the word used in Acts 9:31 for “encouragement” is paraklesis which, like parakletos, is from the parakaleo family of words. Parakaleo means (1) “to entreat, beseech,” (2) “to admonish, exhort,” and then (3) “to comfort, encourage.” Thus, we see that the Holy Spirit as our spiritual enabler is vital to our encouragement.

THE ENCOURAGEMENT FROM MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

THE ANALOGY OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

The body of Christ is one of several pictures or analogies used to instruct us regarding the nature and function of the universal church (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27; Eph. 1:23; 4:12). This picture portrays both the unity and the diversity of the church as an organic body, a spiritual organism, made up of many individual and diverse parts all designed to work together in a caring and functional way. In keeping with the nature of the church as a body made up of many members, numerous passages of the New Testament show us the important role the whole body has in mutual care and encouragement.

Through its diversity of members, as Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 12, the New Testament has many illustrations of encouragement through the loving care of one another. This occurs in numerous ways. Some have the gift of encouragement (Rom. 12:8), some encourage through communication of God’s revelation (Acts 20:2; 1 Cor. 14:3, 31; 1 Thess. 4:18; Tit. 1:9), other by bringing good news (2 Cor. 7:6-7, 13; Eph. 6:22; Col. 4:8), others by giving various kinds of support—financial, lending a helping hand, giving a word of encouragement, supporting others in prayer, showing concern and just being there for one another (cf. Rom. 12:13, 15; Eph. 4:29; Phil. 1:5; 4:10; 1 Thess. 5:11-12).

KEY SCRIPTURES ON ENCOURAGEMENT (1 THESS. 5:11; HEB. 10:23-24)

Because we are to be supporting one another as members of the body of Christ, Scripture exhorts us to become be involved in encouragement of one another.115 Two passages stand out here.

The first is 1 Thessalonians 5:11 where Paul gives the simple exhortation, “Therefore, encourage one another and build up each other, just as you are in fact doing.” The clear implication here is that building each other up, spiritual edification in the truth of Scripture, as it may apply to any given situation, is vital to one’s ability to give others the courage they need to move forward in the will and purpose of God.

The second passage occurs within the framework of Hebrews 10:19-24. The specific verses directed toward encouragement are 10:23-24, “And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works, not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging each other, and even more so because you see the day drawing near” (emphasis mine).

Here again we are told to be involved in encouraging each another. The contextual framework in which this admonition occurs, however, is important to encouraging and being encouraged. The author of Hebrews was writing to a group of Christians (primarily Jewish) who had experienced persecution (10:32-34; 13:3) and who were under pressure to return to their ancestral faith for he warns them about abandoning their confidence in Christ and returning to the old Jewish sacrificial system (cf. 3:6; 6:6; 10:35). Further, he was well aware and even addressed the cause of this—a failure to mature and go forward in the full assurance of the superiority of Christ over the old system because of the completeness and sufficiency of Christ’s finished work (see 5:11-6:6 and 10:19f). Thus, having declared the truth of the finality of Christ’s sacrifice in contrast to the lack of finality of the Old Testament sacrifices (10:1-18), the author of Hebrews appealed to his readers to do three things, each one being marked out by the words, “let us.”

(1) “Let us draw near with a sincere heart in the full assurance that faith brings…” (10:22). They (and we) are to get close to God in the sure confidence of an absolute acceptance by God through Christ. Such confidence is in view of His perfect and finished work as our Great Priest over the household of God (10:19-22). The point here is that apart from such mature understanding and faith in the sufficiency of Christ, there can and will be no capacity for courage along the pathway of life with its many trials.

(2) “And let us hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess, for the one who made the promise is trustworthy” (10:23). They (and we) are to tenaciously cling to the prospect of not just eternal life or entrance into heaven, but of the eternal blessings of the kingdom. This includes participation in the rewards of the kingdom and we can be sure of such rewards because of the trustworthiness of God who had made such promises (vs. 23). The author views believers as partners with Christ and sharers of the kingdom (Heb. 3:1, 14; 2:5-8). Our faithfulness here on earth will result in special privileges in the eternal kingdom, but to be faithful, we must maintain our confidence in the sufficiency of the Savior.

(3) “And let us take thought of how to spur one another on to love and good works,…” (10:24). They (and we) are to give serious consideration to the role we each have to mutually help one another down the pathway of the Christian life as partners in the service of the King. Thus, we are to each consider how we can be used of God to encourage others in the progress of their faith and faithfulness as partners in Christ’s kingdom and enterprise here on earth. The problem is that there are difficulties along our journey that can hinder our determination and courage to follow the Savior and to be faithful to our calling as partners with Him (see Heb. 3:12-14). As a protection and help against the deceitfulness of sin that can sidetrack us, Hebrews 3:13 calls on us to “exhort one another daily.” “Exhort” is parakaleo, which may mean, “to exhort” or “to encourage.” Either way, it shows the mutual responsibility Christians have in helping one another experience the power of Christ for faithful living. But in 10:24, the author gives us more details on this process and purpose.

Literally, the Greek text of verse 24 says, “And let us take note of (observe, perceive) one another.” The verb here is katanoeo, (1) “notice, observe carefully,” (2) “look at (with reflection), consider, contemplate something or someone” (Heb. 3:1; 10:24). The text exhorts us to carefully consider or observe others. Contextually, this is not to be done pharisaically as nit-pickers or as fruit inspectors, but as enablers, as those committed to helping others find the courage they need to go forward in the will of God. The first responsibility is, in a caring way, to genuinely notice people. This is a call to lovingly pay attention to people that we might pick up on their hurts or needs in order to minister accordingly. More will be said on this below, but this is in keeping with Ephesians 4:29, “You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear.”

The next part of the verse takes us to the goal of such observation, “to spur or stimulate one another to love and good works.” “To spur” is the Greek paroxusmos, (cf. the English word paroxysm), which may mean negatively, “to provoke, irritate,” or positively, “to stir, stimulate, encourage.”116 Thus, we are to pay attention to people with a view to encouraging them toward love and good works.

Verse 24 then goes on to explain how this objective of verse 23 is to be carried out. There are three things focused on here: two methods or means and a motive.

First, by “not abandoning our own meetings, as some are in the habit of doing.” As previously stressed, one of God’s means for developing and maintaining courage is people—the body of Christ. And one of the places this is to occur is when the church is assembled together whether in small groups or in the main assembly meetings. Simply put, absenteeism hinders the process of encouragement because it cuts us off from caring for others and us from their care. Naturally, just meeting together does not guarantee that the process of encouragement takes place.

So again, using a different word than that of verse 23, we are specifically told to be “encouraging each other.” This is a verb we have met with before, the verb parakaleo. Remember, this verb may have a prospective appeal in the sense of an exhortation or appeal to others for “obedience” or some form of positive “response” (Rom. 12:1, 8) or it may have, as here, a retrospective appeal in the sense of giving “comfort, encouragement” in the face of burdens, afflictions, or difficult circumstances. As God’s people we need both, but the emphasis here is that of encouragement or gaining the courage to move forward in the will of God.

But would you notice that we are not given specifics on what to do in order to encourage others. This is left up to the discretion of believers who, through the wisdom of God’s Word and dependence on the Holy Spirit, are to look for biblical ways to give courage. Note Paul’s words to the Romans:

Romans 15:13-14 Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe in him, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. But I myself am fully convinced about you, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able to instruct (or admonish) one another.

While the terms encourage or give courage are not used, the principles are fundamentally the same. Through biblical wisdom and the Holy Spirit, Christians can and should be ministering to one another.

Finally, with the words, “and even more so because you see the day drawing near,” an important prophetic or eschatological motivation is brought into the picture. The day refers to that well-known time of Christ’s coming and judgment in the future. A similar use of “day” can be seen in 1 Corinthians 3:13. The urgency of the responsibility of encouraging one another is due to the imminence of this Day of Christ for two reasons:

1. While imminent, there will be an ever growing apostasy which carries with it the danger of apostasy or apathy by Christians (see 1 Thess. 5:4f; 2 Tim. 3:1-13).

2. The coming of Christ for the church will immediately be followed by the Bema, “The Judgment Seat of Christ.” It is here that every Christian will be carefully examined by the Lord Jesus for rewards or their loss on the basis of their faithfulness or works.117

Application: So what then is our responsibility to one another in the body of Christ? The emphasis and focus of this passage in Hebrews is not only instructive, but very contrary to the mentality of our day. The purpose of encouragement is not to simply help one another feel better. As seen in the words, “let us consider one another with a view to love and good works” the first objective is to help one another experience the sufficiency of Christ and Christ-like behavior.

Simply put, every problem, when understood biblically, finds its solution in fellowship with the Savior and with resting in His love and sufficiency, not necessarily in the removal of the problem. Our calling, then, is to help one another experience Jesus Christ. To stimulate or encourage others to love and good works is synonymous with experiencing, in a growing way, the character of Christ or being transformed into His image and character.

Michelangelo, it is said, looked at a block of marble and said, “I see an angel in that block of marble.” God goes into the quarry of sin, takes rough stones, and hews them into the shape of Christ. He is pleased when He looks at us and we remind Him of His only begotten Son, who was a servant.118

Believers, as fellow servants in the body of Christ, are just one of the tools God uses in this process of transformation. This must be the ultimate objective of the encourager.

Knowing Christ intimately and experiencing His transforming life is a repeated emphasis of the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters. Notice this thrust in the following passages:

(1) Life is to be found in the experience of Christ. He is our source of life and righteousness positionally and experientially.

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So the life I now live in the body, I live because of the faithfulness of the Son of God who love me and gave himself for me.

(2) When faced with the prospects of death while daily chained to a Roman soldier in his own apartment, Paul’s concern was that he would experience Christ regardless of the outcome.

Philippians 1:18b-21 Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 1:19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the support of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. 1:20 My confident hope is that I will in no way be ashamed but that with complete boldness, even now as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death. 1:21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

(3) People have all kinds of things they rely upon for their comfort or confidence and significance, but having come to realize that such things were really only liabilities and hindered us from the true purpose in life (Phil. 3:2-9), Paul had this to say:

Philippians 3:10 My aim is to know him, to experience the power of his resurrection, to share in his sufferings, and to be like him in his death, 3:11 and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

(4) Then, in thanking the Philippians for their financial support, Paul could write:

Philippians 4:11-13 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content in any circumstance. I have experienced times of need and times of abundance. In any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of contentment, whether I go satisfied or hungry, have plenty or nothing. I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me.

The exhortations of 1 Thessalonians 5:11 and Hebrews 10:23-24 remind us of another principle that is foundational for our willingness and ability to become committed encouragers. It’s the mindset of seeking to serve rather than be served and of considering the needs of others above our own (Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:3-5).

One of the greatest hindrances to “contemplating others with a view to encouraging them to love and good works” is preoccupation with our own needs or fears and defensive strategies by which we seek to promote or protect self. Someone may say, “Hey, it’s good to see you. How are you doing?” But when you start telling them about a need or burden they interrupted with a barrage of their own difficulties. Underlying this kind of response is the issue of being so self-centered that people only make casual conversation as a spring board to talk about themselves. Or they may simply respond, “Oh, I’m so sorry” and then politely slip away. It’s what could be called, the problem of a surface community that only casually gets involved with one another.

To become genuine encouragers or to engage in any form of ministry, we must become ruthlessly honest regarding our motives (see 1 Cor. 4:5). Because of our natural self-centeredness, it is simply too easy for us to either ignore others or seek to help out of some form of self-love—to be appreciated, to gain a hearing, to be recognized, praised, i.e., to get something in return. Undoubtedly, Paul had this in mind with his appeal to “let love be without hypocrisy” (Rom. 12:9).

Some Final Thoughts

To repeat our definition of encouragement, encouragement is finding (or helping others to find) the courage, by God’s grace and strength, to run the race He has laid out before us no matter how difficult or painful the course. The ultimate goal of the encourager, then, is to help others relate their lives to the Savior and rest in His love, plan, purpose, and provision. Ultimately, if we haven’t helped others to rest in God alone as the source of their courage, comfort, and hope, then we have fallen short as encouragers. I remember after my Dad had passed away from lung cancer, a number of people came to encourage my Mom. She was very appreciative of their care and concern, but I remember her saying we need the encouragement and comfort of others, but ultimately, unless we find our comfort in the Lord who alone is the God of all comfort, we will never truly be comforted. This echoes the words of the Psalmist:

Psalm 62:5-8 My soul, wait in silence for God only, For my hope is from Him. He only is my rock and my salvation, My stronghold; I shall not be shaken. On God my salvation and my glory rest; The rock of my strength, my refuge is in God. Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him; God is a refuge for us. [Selah].

As part of the process of seeking to do this, there are many practical things we can do to demonstrate love, thoughtfulness, and encourage others.

First, what better place to teach and practice encouragement than in the intimacy of one’s home. The home is nothing less than the laboratory of life—the place any facade becomes quickly obvious and where life makes up its mind and can find its greatest encouragement. But too often our homes tend to be places of discouragement through apathy in the pursuit of success or material things or through the prevalence of a critical, overbearing, and sometimes legalistic spirit. Spouses, however, as helpers fitted to each other by God’s design, should become courage givers, parents should encourage their children, and children can even learn to encourage their brothers and sisters and their parents. Children naturally pick up the art of encouragement from their parents when they are the recipients of the mother’s and dad’s words of love, hope, acceptance, approval, and patient instruction. Paul undoubtedly had this in mind when he warned fathers against exasperating their children to anger and appealed to them to become those who nourish them up (physical and spiritual nourishment) in the training and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4).

Second, here are a few ideas to help us put encouragement into action.

1. As we seek to follow the guidelines of Hebrews 10:23-24, we might seek to observe and mention admirable character qualities we see in others, such as punctuality, tactfulness, faithfulness, thoroughness, diligence, honesty, compassion, vision, and faith.

2. As servants who are seeking to be observant encouragers of others, we might notice and call attention to a job well done or to the faithful use of one’s spiritual gift(s). Such is encouraging because it can help people recognize their own spiritual growth and value in the body of Christ.

3. Then, we should especially show support and offer whatever help we can to someone who is going through deep waters or is struggling with a particular problem. While we can’t relieve the problem or make it go away, we can demonstrate God’s love and care and offer words of concern, hope, and comfort. This involves the power of a word given at the right time and in the right way—an important message in the book of Proverbs:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue (Prov. 18:21)

Anxiety in the heart of a man weighs it down, but a good word makes it glad (Prov. 12:25).

A soothing tongue is a tree of life (Prov. 15:4)

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones (Prov. 16:24).

Like apples of gold in settings of silver Is a word spoken in right circumstances (Prov. 25:11).

In their book on encouragement, Crabb and Allender write:

The Scriptures also say that speaking light words of cheer at the wrong time is “like one who takes off a garment on a cold day” (Prov. 25:20).

Words are important. They have very real power. James warns us that although the tongue is a small part of the body, it has the power to determine the whole course of human existence (James 3:5-6).

When God instructs us to encourage one another whenever we come together, He is including the admonition to harness the power of words for a specific purpose. Of course, there are many ways to encourage one another by kind deeds as well as by kind words—taking food to sick friends, visiting folks in the hospital or inviting new folks in church to dinner. But the capacity of words to do serious damage or great good makes verbal encouragement an especially important topic to consider. And that is the theme of this book: encouragement through the careful selection of words that are intended to influence another person meaningfully toward increased godliness.119

So our words need to be carefully weighed because they can either sting or soothe, help or hurt, tear down or build up. This is why Paul warned:

You must let no unwholesome word come out of your mouth, but only what is beneficial for the building up of the one in need, that it may give grace to those who hear (Eph. 4:29).

Let’s note three things about this verse:

(1) We are told that no unwholesome word is to be spoken. This means every word that proceeds out of our mouth is to be carefully weighed according the objective of this verse.

(2) Further, each word is to be weighed so that it is consistent with the objective of building up the one in need. If what is said will compromise or hinder this biblical goal, it is to be rejected. The emphasis here is not on what we say, but on why, on the motivation that stands behind our words. Having the right purpose will go a long way in correcting what is said.

(3) Finally, in this context, the warning against an unwholesome word concerns using the wrong words, those that are critical, hurtful, or frivolous, or words that are spoken at the wrong time, those that aren’t carefully weighed according to the need of the moment.

God has called us to be encouragers or courage builders. The goal is never simply to help people feel better or to be more comfortable. The goal is to help people experience the sufficiency of the Savior and continue on in the race with their eyes fixed on the finish line regardless of the hurdles or distractions that suddenly loom up along the way. This means we may need to get into the race with a fellow believer, with a parent, a spouse, or a son or daughter and pick them up if they have fallen or put an arm around their waist to help them along.

In the 1992 Olympics, Derek Redmond of Great Britain popped his hamstring in the 400-meter semifinal heat. He limped and hobbled around half the Olympic Stadium track. The sight of his son’s distress was too much for Jim Redmond, who had been sitting near the top row of the stadium packed with 65,000 people. He rushed down flights of stairs and blew past security people, who challenged his lack of credentials to be on the track.

“I wasn’t interested in what they were saying,” he said of the security guards. He caught up to his son on the top of the final curve, some 120 meters from the finish. He put one arm around Derek’s waist, another around his left wrist. Then they did a three-legged hobble toward the finish line.

Derek had not a chance of winning a medal, but his determination earned him the respect of the crowd. His father said, “He worked eight years for this. I wasn’t going to let him not finish.” Whether or not his father knew it, he was acting biblically.

“Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:12-13).

Some people have to be helped across the finish line. Some have stumbled over their own feet; other have been tripped by family members and so-called friends. We must help those who have fallen into the snares of the devil; we must lift up the fallen, bind up their wounds, and help them on their journey toward home.120

There are many reasons why we struggle and sometimes stumble or just get discouraged when the race seems impossible or overwhelming. Whatever we or others may face, God has called us to become encouragers, those who seek to help each other in running the race God has laid out before us.

Conclusion

In the previous study on endurance and patience, I mentioned that my wife has a serious type of cancer of the bone marrow called multiple myeloma. By God’s grace, we found out about her cancer very early, before it had advanced beyond what one oncologist called stage I. Still, the traditional treatment of the medical establishment in this country is not too promising, to say the least. Because of this she has opted for some alternative approaches that focus on building up the immune system to help the body do what God designed it to do, fight disease including cancer. This has meant a very rigid routine that includes diet, exercise, and a host of supplements designed to enhance the immune system. Naturally, there are conflicting ideas and approaches and one of the difficulties is weighing all choices and claims and choosing which diet to follow and what supplements to take. Frankly, the whole thing sometimes seems overwhelming if not impossible.

As Christians who live by faith in a sovereign God who has laid out a race for us to run, hurdles and all, the Lord is our burden bearer. We are seeking His wisdom, and if it’s His will, healing for my dear wife. Above all, however, she wants Christ to be magnified in her life whether by life or by death. Still, sometimes it is terribly difficult, not just for her but for me also because of my love for her. Facing this disease, praying for wisdom, making the choices, and following the routine requires courage—a lot of courage.

One day recently we’d had a particularly difficult day. Kathie had been to the doctor and was overwhelmed with all that was going on and I wasn’t far behind. Looking at all she had to do and trying to make the right choices appeared hopeless and impossible. I could see the pain in her eyes and the strain on her face. Well, it was time for our afternoon walk. So I said, “Come on, it’s time to walk and we can talk.” We spent that time talking, as usual, but I did most of the talking (not preaching). My goal was to help her (and myself) to rest in the sufficiency of the Savior. I could not “make it all better” nor could I remove the problem, but I could show my love and support and help both of us focus on the eternal perspective and on a God who cares and who is infinitely bigger than any of our problems. I’ll never forget her words and her face as we arrived back at the house some 35 minutes later. With a smile on her face and peace in her eyes, she said, “Thank you sweetheart, that really encouraged me. It no longer seems so overwhelming.”

I know there will be other times like this in the months ahead, but as we are there for each other and as the Lord is there for us, we are committed to giving each other the courage to continue in the fight. With the Lord as our primary source of strength and encouragement and taking it one day at a time, we will find the courage to fight the good fight and continue on toward the finish line together.

Session 14

1. Read Mark 15:42-47 along with the article. What three things demonstrated that Joseph of Arimathea was a man of courage?

2. Using a dictionary and the text of this article, write a definition of “courage” and “encouragement”.

Courage

Encouragement

3. How is encouragement defined in light of the whole of Scripture?

4. Where does God provide us with the greatest means of courage?

5. According to Romans 15:4, what is the purpose of Scripture?

6. What are the four fundamental principles that are vital to courage and encouragement, found in Joshua 1:1-9?

7. Whose battle was Joshua fighting?

8. How does knowing this give us courage in our daily challenges?

9. List some of the specific promises found in Scripture that are most important to you?

10. What is the principal way in which God can speak to us each day?

11. Read Ephesians 1:17-23. How are you encouraged in the following areas?

The hope of His calling

The wealth of His glorious inheritance

The incomparable greatness of His power

Christ’s resurrection and ascension

12. What is God’s promise to us in Hebrews 13:5 and Deuteronomy 4:24?

13. In what specific areas in your life do you need this encouragement?

14. Describe in your own words how the Holy Spirit is an encourager in the believer’s life.

15. How is He an encourager in your life? Please be specific.

16. In what ways are we to be encouragers within the body of Christ?

17. Read Hebrews 10:15-25. Describe how and why we are encouraged to:

Draw near with sincere hearts?

Hold unwaveringly to hope?

Spur one another on?

18. What encouragement do you receive from the following verses?

Galatians 2:20

Philippians 1:18-21

Philippians 3:10-11

Philippians 4:11-13

19. How much time do you spend each day in God’s Word so that you can be encouraged?

20. What will you do to intentionally increase your daily time with God in His Word?

GROUP DISCUSSION

What are some practical things you can do, beginning now, to encourage others? Please be specific about real people who are in your lives now.