

GROWING CHURCH LEADERS

A Study in Practical Holiness

Ernest N. Prabhakar

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Dedicated to my firstborn son,
Joshua Rohan Prabhakar,
who slept as I wrote this.

About This Study

It is time for a revolution in how the church nurtures new leaders.

As Jim Downing of the Navigators points out¹, Jesus trained his disciples by imparting:

- Knowledge, through teaching

- Character, by modeling and example

- Skills, through guided experience

While knowledge can be learned anywhere, character and skills are best developed as part of a community that lives, worships, and serves together (e.g., a church).

We have developed Growing Church Leaders as a way for those who are mature to train the next generation of leaders in their churches to **Think Biblically**, **Live Wisely**, and **Serve Faithfully**. This course is designed to help senior leaders guide a small group of faithful men and women in:

- Memorizing Bible verses

- Reading classic Christian books

- Leading devotions, typically from Psalms or Proverbs

- Studying entire chapters of the Bible, verse by verse

- Exploring how Scripture applies to their lives

- Responding with repentance, action, and worship

Our prayer is that every growing church will invest in establishing future leaders on a solid foundation of biblical truth, Christian character, and spiritual discipline — i.e., practical holiness. For that reason, this material is available in book form and as a free download at <<http://2transform.us/grow>> under a Creative Commons “share alike” license. You are free to adapt the material to the needs of your church or denomination, as long as you allow others to do the same.

May God use His Word to build His Body for His Kingdom!

¹ Personal Communication, May 2010

Foreword: A Note to Pastors

Over the past few years I have conducted an informal survey of many pastors, asking them the following questions:

Do you believe it is the responsibility of the local church to disciple young Christians?

Do you have a defined program for discipleship?

Do you believe it is the responsibility of the local church to train future leaders?

Do you have a defined program for leadership development?

The answers I received back overwhelmingly confirm the need for this study on **“Growing Church Leaders.”**

Almost every pastor agreed the local church should be actively involved in discipleship. Most of them had defined programs to ensure discipleship was taking place, primarily in their youth ministries. Most pastors also agreed the local church should be actively involved in training future leaders. However, only a few had a defined program in place for leadership development.

2 Timothy 2:2 is more than a good suggestion from the Apostle Paul to his disciple, Timothy. This passage is a mandate to every lead pastor:

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also. — 2 Timothy 2:2

Christian leadership is not a static position one can attain. It isn't a title attached to a person's name. It is a dynamic process that goes on over an entire lifetime. However, there needs to be a starting place to begin this life-long process and a structure to ensure that our future leaders are getting the right foundations laid in their lives.

“Growing Church Leaders” is the result of faithful men committing what they have learned to other faithful men over time. The topics for this study originated while I was training seven young men at Kingsway Community Church in San Jose. One of those young leaders, Dr. Ernest Prabhakar, asked if he could format what he had been learning into a one-year study program for training future leaders.

“Growing Church Leaders” is the fruit of entrusting to others “who will be able to teach others also.” Ernie has remained faithful to the teachings entrusted to him while presenting this material in his own unique dialogue format. I have enjoyed teaching the material in this book and look forward to our next “Growing Church Leaders” class.

If you are a lead pastor, I recommend that you select some young men and women within your church who likely have a call upon their lives to be leaders. Ask them to make a thirty-six week commitment to study “Growing Church Leaders” with you. I am confident this will be the

beginning of a dynamic process that will prepare men and women to lead others into thinking biblically, living wisely, and serving faithfully.

Pastor John Isaacs

Kingsway Community Church, San Jose, California, USA

Assigned Readings

Each lesson lists associated chapters from classic Christian books. Students should read them in advance of the discussion for additional background and depth into the assigned topic.

A. Think Biblically

Students should read at least one of the following:

Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings by Wayne Grudem

Essential Truths of the Christian Faith by R. C. Sproul

B. Live Wisely

Students should read both of the following:

Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion by Peter Kreeft

Foundations of Wisdom: The Book of Proverbs by Dick Hockett

C. Serve Faithfully

Though their content overlaps, students should ideally read both of the following:

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard Foster

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald Whitney

Acknowledgements

Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.
— Proverbs 11:14

More than most authors, I am deeply indebted to those who had faith in me and in this project. Without those who so freely gave of their trust and their time, I would never have had the confidence or discipline to complete it. I particularly am indebted to:

Pastor John Isaacs of Kingsway Community Church, who not only agreed to let a layman write a leadership Bible study, but actually led a class through it week by week as I wrote it.

The courageous members of that class, who like Abraham stepped out in faith “not knowing where they were to go”: Dave Avilla, Luke Bowen, Mary Brooding, Meaghan Hernandez, Ryan McKee, Lora Nardi, Randy and Cathy Peterson, and Ralph Raabe.

Reviewers Robby Butler, Barney Coombs, Dick Hockett, John McClements, and Brian Watts for their insightful and detailed comments.

My editors, Katie Isaacs and Andrew Isaacs.

My loving and supportive wife Sandhya.

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

Introduction: The Road to Holiness

They [the four living creatures] do not rest day or night, saying:

“Holy, holy, holy,

Lord God Almighty,

Who was and is and is to come!” — Revelations 4:8b

I did not intend to write about holiness. My goal was to develop a Bible study for training Christian leaders. To ensure balance, I felt it important to simultaneously nurture the:

Mind (**theology**)

Heart (**character**), and

Soul (**discipline**).

Only near the end did I realize those three dimensions reflect Andrew Murray’s² depiction of God as “The Thrice-Holy One,” who says:

I am Holy (God’s nature)

Be Holy (our nature)

I make Holy (the process)

In other words, I discovered that the essence of Christian leadership is the same as the essence of God Himself: holiness!

But what exactly is holiness? We will be spending the next thirty-six weeks exploring that question. At it’s most basic level, however, the word holy means **set apart**.

The first thing we must learn is that God is distinctly **Other**; He is not quite like anything we have experienced before. Yet paradoxically, God desires that same “other-ness” to be manifest in us. We can never make ourselves other than what we are, yet somehow we can let God remake us in the image of His holy name.

May this course help you comprehend and be conformed to that name.

Ernest N. Prabhakar

Santa Clara, California, USA

² **Holy in Christ:** Thoughts on the Calling of God’s Children to be Holy as He is Holy

A. Think Biblically

“I Am Holy”

A. Think Biblically

But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” — 1 Peter 1:15–16

The Apostle John describes God as **Light** (cf. **1 John 1:5**) and **Love** (cf. **1 John 4:8**). God’s favorite term for describing Himself, however, is **Holy** (cf. **Leviticus 19:2**).

What does it mean to be holy, and how does that relate to light and love? What do these words teach us about the nature of the God we say we serve?

The answers to these and similar questions are found in the discipline of **theology**, the study of God. Alas, many Christians find the whole concept of theology intimidating. To paraphrase C.S. Lewis³, there are “two equal and opposite errors into which” we fall about theology:

to disbelieve its relevance

“to believe and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest”

Theology is not an end in itself. It is simply a way to discipline our minds to **understand God as revealed in the totality of His Word**, by building on the insights of those who have gone before us. If we humble ourselves, theology will bring us into the Holiest of Holies, where we can see God face-to-face, see ourselves as He sees us, and become what He calls us to be.

Are you ready?

Assigned Reading

Students should read at least one of the following:

Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings by Wayne Grudem

Essential Truths of the Christian Faith by R. C. Sproul

³ In the preface to **The Screwtape Letters**, when discussing devils

A.1 God's Word

The Authority of Scripture

In Which We Discover How and Why God Speaks through the Bible

Memory Verse: All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. — 2 Timothy 3:16–17

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Chapter | 2. The Authority and Inerrancy of Scripture |
| Chapter | 3. The Clarity, Necessity, and Sufficiency of Scripture |

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Chapter | 1. Revelation |
| Chapter | 2. Paradox, Mystery, and Contradiction |
| Chapter | 4. Special Revelation and the Bible Study |
| Chapter | 7. The Canon of Scripture |
| Chapter | 8. Interpreting the Bible Study |
| Chapter | 9. Private Interpretation |

Introduction

Who can we trust?

This question has challenged those studying philosophy, politics, and religion for millennia. All human civilization, not to mention every relationship, hangs on the answer to that question.

Christians often disagree about just how much reliance we should place on authority figures, personal experience, and historical tradition. One thing we all agree on—at least in principle—is that Scripture is the ultimate authority. Yet in practice, we still argue about what that means.

To help resolve that argument, let us ask the Holy Bible how it says it should be interpreted.

Devotion

Read **Psalm 19**. Why is God's Word so precious to the psalmist?

Bible Study

2 Timothy 3

The first question to ask when reading Scripture is, "What is the context?"

{3:1} But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come:

Here the context is in “the last days.” It is tempting to equate them with the present, since we seem much closer to the end times; however, we must remember that the Bible was written for all people at all times, not just for you and me. Scripture is always relevant, though some passages may seem more appropriate at certain times. This concept is sometimes called **the universality of Scripture**.

Here, Paul describes vices that are considered virtues during a time of moral decay:

{2} For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, {3} unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, {4} traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...

The most dangerous quality about these men is that they do not appear to be atheists; rather, they seem to be on God’s side:

{5a} having a form of godliness but denying its power.

We might say they have religious trappings but lack inward transformation. This Christian façade is what makes them so dangerous:

{5b} And from such people turn away!

We especially need to “turn away” if we are not thoroughly grounded in the truth:

{6} For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, {7} always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.

Submitting to the truth not only protects us from evil men, but it keeps us from becoming one of them:

{8} Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith...

These names (Jannes and Jambres) are traditionally associated with the Egyptian magicians in Exodus 7:11, who put on a good show but could not compete with the true power of God:

{9} but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was.

In contrast to them and their manifest folly, Paul presents himself to examination by Timothy:

{10} But you have carefully followed my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, longsuffering, love, perseverance...

Paul tells Timothy to trust in the holiness he has seen in Paul’s life. This is visible not merely in Paul’s virtues, but in everything he endures:

{11a} persecutions, afflictions, which happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra—what persecutions I endured.

Paul does not speak to boast in himself, but to bring glory to God:

{11b} And out of [them] all the Lord delivered me.

So why exactly is Paul sharing all of this? His words serve as a model for us, since we will be facing the same trials:

{12} Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

But perhaps more importantly, Paul writes to Timothy to highlight the difference between a life based on truth and a life based on deception:

{13} But evil men and impostors will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.

So what must Timothy do to follow the right path?

{14} But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned [them]...

Let us break down these verses:

Timothy starts off by knowing someone whom he deems trustworthy due to his virtue and sacrifice.

From this person, he gains valuable lessons.

He becomes sure of his truth, presumably by watching him in practice.

Timothy must now continue to practice those truths he has learned.

It is a natural progression, one most of us have experienced in many areas of life. This is one meaning of the word faithful: perseverance in honoring the truth passed down to us.

However, the authority we revere is not a mere tradition of our ancestors. It is the very Word of God that both complements and challenges our human teachers:

{15} and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

For Paul and Timothy, “Holy Scriptures” probably meant the Greek Septuagint (which roughly corresponds to our Old Testament), since that is from what the New Testament usually quotes. But since those scriptures do not actually mention Christ Jesus by name, how exactly can they make Timothy “wise for salvation through faith”?

The first key is probably the phrase “make wise” (sophizo, as in the word philosopher). While the Old Testament does not convey explicit information about Jesus, it provides the necessary wisdom to understand salvation, by teaching Timothy the nature of faith.

A general pattern exists here: while the Bible may not answer every question, it provides answers to the essential questions. This includes not only theological concepts, but everything needed for a comprehensive worldview that shapes how we approach all other questions and answers. This is known as **the sufficiency of Scripture**, the doctrine that we need no other authoritative revelation but the Word of God to accomplish His purposes.

To be sure, we believe that God still speaks to us today; however, all such post-biblical revelation is explicitly subordinate to Scripture. Contrast this with the New Testament, which we believe supersedes and completes the Old Testament in a way that modern revelation does not. Conversely, we disagree with Muslims and Mormons, who claim their holy books supersede the New Testament.

The second key word in verse fifteen is “able” (dunamai, as in the word dynamo). Paul claims that Scripture itself — with the help of the Holy Spirit — is able to make us wise. Even though Timothy is reading the Bible in translation without an external authority to provide explanations, God can use Scripture alone to communicate His plan of salvation. This doctrine is known as **the clarity of Scripture**, and it is central to Protestant Christianity.

To be sure, this does not mean that everything is immediately clear to everyone; Scripture itself affirms that some concepts are not only difficult to understand (cf. **2 Peter 3:16**), but they require disciplined study to rightly discern (cf. **2 Timothy 2:15**), and they are veiled to unbelievers (cf. **2 Corinthians 4:3**). The point is that the central facts are accessible to “ordinary people, who approach [truth] in faith and humility.”

So, what are the essential uses of Scripture? A good list is the one that follows:

{16} All Scripture [is] given by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness...

This famous verse contains a wealth of sophisticated insight. The first gem is that scripture is “God-breathed” (theo-pneustos, as in the word pneumonia). This unique term captures the dual nature of Scripture in that it originates from God but is expressed by men:

{2 Peter 1:21} for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

In many ways, this concept mirrors the dual nature of Christ Himself, who was fully God yet fully man. Just as the church has had to maintain that paradoxical tension against heresies which stress one aspect of Christ’s nature and deny the other, so too are there two opposing errors we can make in regards to Scripture.

The first erroneous view of the Bible is to see it as simply as a collection of sixty-six books by diverse human authors expressing their personal perspectives on the nature of religion. The Bible is much more than that; it is a living entity ordained by God, faithfully reflecting what He did, said, and felt, not some collection of man-made myths. In a very real sense, it is the words of God Himself, which is what we mean when we speak of **the authority of Scripture**.

At the same time, we must resist the temptation to think that the Bible was dictated by God to robotic scribes. The various books of the Bible reflect the culture, language, and personality of their human authors, while remaining faithful to the direction of God’s Spirit.

This is why it is possible to translate Scripture into modern languages. All translations are of necessity imperfect human artifacts. However, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, they can still communicate — and we can perceive — the essence of God’s intent, the God-breath behind the original human authors.

The end result is that we must approach Scripture with humility, recognizing on the one hand that God desires to use those words to communicate with us, while still acknowledging that our present understanding of them is but an imperfect mirror of God’s original thoughts. For that reason, we must continually work to improve our understanding of Scripture. For our minds, that means learning about the language and culture of the original writers, as well as listening to faithful teachers like Paul who lived the words they preached. For our hearts, it means obeying the words we already understand so God can reveal more to us (cf. **Philippians 3:16**).

The importance of hearing God is why Paul explicitly links the inspiration of Scriptures with its usefulness for the following:

- Doctrine
- Reproof
- Correction
- Instruction in righteousness

Of course the Bible is about much more than that list: it contains history, literature, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, zoology, and other types of content. However, these four topics speak directly to Scripture's core purpose:

{17a} that the man of God may be complete...

We do not study Scripture as a religious ritual; we study it in order to become complete human beings. And what does that mean?

{17b} thoroughly equipped for every good work.

A mature person is someone whose mind, body, heart, and soul are set apart to do every good work God calls them to do. In other words, a mature person is holy!

Achieving this holiness requires embracing the whole purpose of Scripture. If we study doctrine but resist reproof, or if we pursue righteousness without understanding doctrine, we will fail. To enable our success, we will focus on these four specific topics during this course, using the Bible as our study guide:

Think Biblically: doctrine

Live Wisely: reproof and correction

Serve Faithfully: instruction in righteousness

Though each module emphasizes a different aspect, it is essential to keep all four in mind whenever we read the Scripture. That is why every lesson ends with a "RAW" section (Repentance, Action, Worship), to help information flow from our mind to our heart, body, and soul.

We have full confidence that God will bring holiness to our lives as we study the Scripture because of the testimony of Scripture itself, as well as the testimonies of faithful men and women who have loved the Word more than their own lives.

Decision

Repentance: Identify a Scriptural "reproof" or "correction" that you need to apply to your life.

Action: What good works might God be calling you to undertake for His glory?

Worship: What do the thousands of years God spent preparing Scripture tell us about His desire to communicate with us?

For Next Week

Read **Matthew 28**. What does Jesus want His followers to remember about Him?

Memory Verse: Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. — Matthew 28:19

A.2 God's Commission

Our Call as Leaders

In Which We Discover God's Call for Us As Leaders and What Theology Has to Do with It

Memory Verse: Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. — Matthew 28:19

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter 27. Baptism

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter 31. The Baptism of Christ

Chapter 41. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

Chapter 80. Baptism

Chapter 99. The Kingdom of God

Introduction

Having established the authority of Scripture, we now look to it for help in understanding our authority as leaders. From where does authority come? How should it be used? And most importantly, what is God's ultimate purpose in calling us to be leaders?

To answer these questions, we turn to the passage commonly known as "The Great Commission"...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 47**. How does God relate to the nations?

Bible Study

Matthew 28

Like our faith itself, this chapter begins with the resurrection of Jesus:

{28:1} Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb.

To those women at that time, the tomb represented everything that had gone wrong. Jesus had been betrayed, falsely accused, tortured, crucified, and killed. All their grand dreams of Jesus being the promised Messiah had gone to dust—or had they?

{2} And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. {3} His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. {4} And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men.

As so often happens, God reveals His power only after all human hope is lost.

God does not just reveal His power, but He reveals His compassion:

{5} But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.”

We see here in dramatic fashion three pillars of Christian leadership:

The display of God’s awesome glory

The communication of God’s tender compassion

The evidence of God’s miraculous intervention:

{6} He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay.

To be effective as leaders, those we serve must see all three of these pillars in and through us.

Immediately after experiencing these revelations, the angel of the Lord gives these women a mandate to share what they have learned:

{7} And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead, and indeed He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him. Behold, I have told you.” {8} So they went out quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring His disciples word.

As they act in obedience, they are surprised to encounter Jesus:

{9} And as they went to tell His disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, “Rejoice!” So they came and held Him by the feet and worshiped Him.

Jesus seemingly shows up solely to bring joy to those He loves, since His message is the same as that of the angel:

{10} Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go [and] tell My brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see Me.”

Meanwhile, the other witnesses to the resurrection have a very different reaction:

{11} Now while they were going, behold, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all the things that had happened. {12} When they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, {13} saying, “Tell them, ‘His disciples came at night and stole Him [away] while we slept.’ {14} And if this comes to the governor’s ears, we will appease him and make you secure.” {15} So they took the money and did as they were instructed; and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.

It is sobering to realize the guards and the priests had direct evidence for the resurrection, yet they chose to deny it rather than change their opinion about Jesus.

Unlike the disbelieving guards and priests, the disciples act on the evidence they receive:

{16} Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had appointed for them.

They are rewarded for their action by seeing Jesus:

{17a} When they saw Him, they worshiped Him...

However, seeing is not necessarily believing:

{17b} but some doubted.

Amazing. These are men who had been with Jesus from the earliest days of His ministry. They had given up everything to follow Him, seen all He had said and done, and finally come face to face with His resurrection power. Yet some of them still doubt! Why?

Like us, perhaps they only want to trust in what they can understand. Jesus had done something beyond anything they could have imagined. Christ's raising from the dead simply did not fit their preconceived notions of how the Messiah should behave.

As usual, Jesus understands their fears, but He chooses to address them on his own terms:

{18} And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

This mind-boggling assertion is central to a Christian vision of leadership. Christ has complete authority over everything, spiritual as well as secular. Therefore, any authority we exercise is both under and alongside His. We are to hold our positions and powers loosely, knowing we are merely temporary stewards of what belongs to Him alone.

So what does He want us do with this authority we have been given?

{19a} Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...

The Greek word for "make disciples" is *matheteuo*, and its meaning goes beyond instructing the mind to include submitting the will. Central to the biblical vision of leadership is the idea of discipling people's wills, not merely informing their minds. We need to focus on making full-fledged disciples who obey, not simply winning converts who agree.

Equally interesting is *ethnos*, the word translated as "nations." In biblical times, this term did not carry the connotation of "political nation-states" as it does today; a more literal translation would be "ethnic group," "tribe," or "people group." More informally, Jewish writers used the term to describe all the Gentiles.

In Western culture, we tend to focus on making disciples of individuals, which is obviously necessary. However, God's heart extends beyond individuals to encompass "all the nations." A well-rounded understanding of discipleship needs to transform our external relationships with our neighbors as well as our vertical relationship with Him. God is concerned with both the individual and the community, since as the Trinity, He is both:

{19b} baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...

There are at least three different ways of interpreting the act of "baptizing in the name":

Treat it as a formal act, where we affirm our allegiance to the Christian God as opposed to some pagan deity.

See it as a ritual, or sacrament. Here, the emphasis is on baptism as a spiritual transaction, where it shifts us from a position of condemnation to one of justification before God.

Experience it as a metaphor for the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Though all three interpretations have their place, we will focus on the last perspective. We define becoming Christ's disciples as the process of dying to our old nature and progressively

replacing it with the name of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Because God's name is holy, the goal of leadership is to produce disciples who are holy!

A key aspect of holiness is having the right mental picture of who God is and what He wants:

{20a} teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you...

This use of the word "teaching" (didaskō, as in the word didactic) primarily refers to intellectual instruction, though it is still in the context of obedience. The most challenging part of this verse is actually the phrase "all things."

Historically, different factions of the church have emphasized one aspect of Christ's teachings at the expense of others (e.g., love vs. judgment, purity vs. forgiveness, truth vs. compassion, authority vs. freedom, etc.), eventually leading us to swallow camels while straining gnats (cf. Matthew 23:24). Our task as leaders is to continually push ourselves (and those under our authority) to move beyond what is comfortable within the context of both secular and religious culture and to embrace all that God commands for us.

Fortunately, we are not alone in this task:

{20b} and lo, I am with you always, [even] to the end of the age." Amen.

This is literally the last word on Christian leadership. Everything we do of importance can only be done in, through, and by the presence of Jesus Christ in our lives. As long as we hold fast to Him above all things (religious or otherwise), we can rest assured that He will be glorified.

Decision

Repentance: Where have you substituted your own agenda for God's commission?

Action: How can you increase your focus on making Christ-like disciples?

Worship: Meditate on the joy of having Christ with us always.

For Next Week

Read **Exodus 3**. How does God identify Himself?

Memory Verse: And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. — Exodus 3:14

A.3 God's Identity

Relationship and Transcendence

In Which We Discover Who God Is and Why That Matters

Memory Verse: And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you. — Exodus 3:14

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter 4. The Character of God: “Incommunicable” Attributes

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter 12. The Self-Existence of God

Chapter 13. The Omnipotence of God

Chapter 14. The Omnipresence of God

Chapter 15. The Omniscience of God

Introduction

Last week, we discovered that God wants us to disciple people into His holy name. This week, we will discuss the first aspect of God's name: His identity. God names Himself to Moses in terms of His relationships, His mission, and His transcendence. In turn, transcendence helps us understand God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

Devotion

Read **Psalm 8**. How is God both transcendent (beyond us) and immanent (with us)?

Bible Study

Exodus 3

Our story begins with Moses, a man who has known great glory and greater shame, and now finds himself on the backside of nowhere:

{3:1} Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian. And he led the flock to the back of the desert, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

We do not know if Horeb was called “the mountain of God” before this, but it certainly earns the title now:

{2} And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed.

Of course we know it is the angel of the Lord, but Moses is just drawn by the fireworks:

{3} Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn."

He ends up getting a much bigger show than he bargained for:

{4a} So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!"

For some reason, God chooses to act through Moses' apparently idle curiosity to get his attention.

Moses, despite his surprise, responds respectfully when God calls him by name:

{4b} And he said, "Here I am."

Before explaining Himself, God first establishes some ground rules:

{5} Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand [is] holy ground."

The word for "ground" is *adamah*, from which we get the name Adam. Given that we are but dust to God, it is oddly comforting that He considers dirt worthy of sanctification and formal introduction:

{6a} Moreover He said, "I [am] the God of your father—the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

God begins by asserting a common reference point: His relationship with Moses' ancestors. Moses had presumably heard the founding stories of Israel from his birth mother, so he had some context for interpreting this strange apparition before him. At least, enough context to make him realize he was way out of his league:

{6b} And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God.

God appears to overlook Moses' discomfort, as He has serious business on His mind:

{7} And the LORD said: "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who [are] in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows.

This must surely have struck a chord with Moses, who had also been moved by the mistreatment of His fellow Hebrews (cf. Exodus 2:11–12). Like most of us do, he must have wondered whether God was paying attention to him. To find out that God cares about the same things we care about it is a wonderful feeling, especially when that empathy is linked to action:

{8} "So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites.

Again, why?

{9} Now therefore, behold, the cry of the children of Israel has come to Me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them.

Moses must be thinking, "This is great! God feels exactly the same way I do and is finally going to do something about it. Perhaps he will come down and smite Egypt the way he smote Sodom and Gomorrah, or the Tower of Babel!"

Well, yes—but there is a catch:

{10} Come now, therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring My people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.”

God is not simply conveying a message of deliverance; He is recruiting Moses to be the agent of that deliverance. While the Moses of forty years ago would have jumped at the chance to be a deliverer, this Moses is far more reluctant:

{11} But Moses said to God, “Who [am] I that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?”

Oddly, God does not answer Moses’ question, at least not directly:

{12} So He said, “I will certainly be with you. And this [shall be] a sign to you that I have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain.”

This is a powerful promise: **I will be with you**. On the other hand, it is not terribly reassuring, since it only manifests itself after Moses succeeds. Perhaps this is why he wants to take with him something more tangible:

{13} Then Moses said to God, “Indeed, [when] I come to the children of Israel and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they say to me, ‘What [is] His name?’ what shall I say to them?”

As mentioned in our previous lesson, the biblical concept of name refers to someone’s character. From that perspective, Moses is basically asking, “What kind of God are you? How should I represent you to the people you’re promising to save?”

God’s response is quite stunning:

{14} And God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” And He said, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’ “

Philosophers sometimes use the term **non-contingent reality** (absolute self-existence) to define divinity. From there, they go on to discuss what form divinity might take and what (if anything) can be known about it. By this simple “I AM,” God asserts that divinity is:

singular (as opposed to divided, as in polytheism)

personal (as opposed to impersonal, as in materialism)

present (as opposed to absent, as in deism)

active (as opposed to passive, as in pantheism)

He (as opposed to we, as in secular humanism)

Why does God answer Moses in such an exotic fashion? Perhaps He gives him this answer because it is essential for us to first recognize that God simply “is,” independent of our interactions with Him. In our science-dominated world, it is tempting to think of God as some sort of disembodied spirit or keeper of the afterlife, who is outside of (or even subordinate to) the physical world.

The truth is the exact opposite: God Himself is the ultimate reality, and everything we experience or perceive (physical, emotional, or rational) is ultimately contingent on Him.

The fact that God exists outside of His creation is known as His **transcendence**. God's transcendence is intimately tied up with His holiness. God is literally set apart from the physical world He created, even though He permeates every aspect of it.

One useful metaphor—though it is only a metaphor—is that God relates to creation the way an author relates to a book. As such, He is not bound by the rules which exist inside creation. We can describe this reality with terms such as:

Omniscience (all-knowing)

Omnipotence (all-powerful)

Omnipresence (everywhere)

Philosophers sometimes consider these abilities a source of paradox (e.g., “If God can do anything, can He create a rock so big He can’t lift it?”). They overlook the fact that the term omnipotence does not define God; rather, it is our attempt to put human terminology around the brute fact that everything in creation is subject to God’s will and oversight.

Even more extraordinary is the fact that this source of ultimate reality claims relationship with Moses through his ancestors:

{15a} Moreover God said to Moses, “Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.

Here we see the familial, historical, and philosophical concepts of divinity joined together into one seamless whole, not just for Moses, but for us as well:

{15} This [is] My name forever, and this [is] My memorial to all generations.'

Importantly, this is not some mere theoretical discussion. It is essential preparation for possibly the greatest act of human leadership this side of Jesus Christ:

{16} Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, ‘The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, appeared to me, saying, “I have surely visited you and [seen] what is done to you in Egypt; {17} and I have said I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Amorites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.” ‘

Once Moses knows who God is, He can articulate that to the people of Israel in a way that inspires them to follow:

{18a} Then they will heed your voice;

He will also represent God to Pharaoh:

{18b} and you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt; and you shall say to him, ‘The LORD God of the Hebrews has met with us; and now, please, let us go three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’

However, Moses will not be as successful there:

{19} But I am sure that the king of Egypt will not let you go, no, not even by a mighty hand.

Therefore, God will reveal Himself through His own work:

{20} So I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My wonders which I will do in its midst; and after that he will let you go.

And in doing so, God will not merely glorify Himself, but He will bring honor to His people:

{21} And I will give this people favor in the sight of the Egyptians; and it shall be, when you go, that you shall not go empty-handed. {22} But every woman shall ask of her neighbor, namely, of her who dwells near her house, articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing; and you shall put [them] on your sons and on your daughters. So you shall plunder the Egyptians.”

The bottom line is this: everything we most long for can only be satisfied by knowing who God is. This does not mean merely knowing about Him, but it means interacting with Him, feeling His heart, seeing His power, and connecting with everything He has done, is doing, and is about to do.

Are you ready to follow Moses and walk toward the burning bush?

Decision

Repentance: Where has your concept of God fallen short of His reality?

Action: To whom might God send you as He sent Moses?

Worship: How does God’s transcendence make you feel about His desire to relate to you?

For Next Week

Read **Exodus 33–34**. Why does Moses still want to know God’s name?

Memory Verse: And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth.” — Exodus 34:6

P. S. Next week is a somewhat longer lesson, so it will be helpful to read it thoroughly in advance.

A.4 God's Character

His Glory, Our Grace

In Which We Discover What God Looks Like and Why Moses Wants to See More of Him

Memory Verse: And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth." — Exodus 34:6

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter 5. The "Communicable" Attributes

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter 16. The Holiness of God

Chapter 17. The Goodness of God

Chapter 18. The Justice of God

Introduction

This week, we will continue exploring what it means to be baptized in the holy name of God. While the **transcendent** attributes we studied last time are unique to God alone, this lesson focuses on His **communicable** attributes, those He seeks to pass along to us.

Devotion

Read **Psalm 103**. Why does the Psalmist bless the LORD?

Bible Study

Exodus 33–34

Our story starts with Moses taking the people of Israel on the road:

{33:1} Then the LORD said to Moses, "Depart and go up from here, you and the people whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt, to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, 'To your descendants I will give it.'

God promises to go before them:

{2} And I will send My Angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanite and the Amorite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite.

But He does not promise to go with them:

{3} Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.”

This distresses them greatly:

{4} And when the people heard this bad news, they mourned, and no one put on his ornaments.

God is apparently impressed enough by their grieving to reconsider:

{5} For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the children of Israel, ‘You [are] a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.’ “ {6} So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb.

Though God is reluctant to appear in the midst of Israel, He does not mind appearing to Moses:

{7} Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass [that] everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which [was] outside the camp. {8} So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, [that] all the people rose, and each man stood [at] his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. {9} And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood [at] the door of the tabernacle, and [the LORD] talked with Moses. {10} All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing [at] the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man [in] his tent door.

In fact, He relates to Moses with extraordinary intimacy:

{11} So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle.

Despite all that, Moses wants more. In many ways, this is a direct continuation (as well as a fulfillment) of our prior lesson. Despite everything that he has seen and learned, Moses is still preoccupied with the same question of who God is:

{12} Then Moses said to the LORD, “See, You say to me, ‘Bring up this people.’ But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.’

This time, though, Moses seems more concerned about God’s behavior, not just His identity:

{13} Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation [is] Your people.”

God does not seem to answer Moses directly, though He offers a reassuring response:

{14} And He said, “My Presence will go [with you], and I will give you rest.”

Moses is still not satisfied:

{15} Then he said to Him, “If Your Presence does not go [with us], do not bring us up from here.

Why make such a big deal about God’s presence?

{16} For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who [are] upon the face of the earth.”

Clearly, Moses understands that their unique identity as a holy (separate) people is wholly dependent on God’s presence among them.

God appears to appreciate this response:

{17} So the LORD said to Moses, “I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.”

Moses got what he asked for, yet he still hungers for more:

{18} And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.”

Glory is a powerful word, which can be defined as a “highly praiseworthy asset,” or “the best attributes thereof.” Moses wants to see what God’s goodness looks like; God promises to grant his request:

{19} Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.”

While God promises to show His glory later, He gives Moses a few hints right away:

God appears to equate His glory with His goodness; we could even take this as a definition: God’s glory is the demonstration of all that is good about Him. In other words, **God’s glory is the external manifestation of His inward holiness.**

God asserts what might be called His “**sovereign discretion**”: His freedom to choose to whom He acts with graciousness and mercy (also translated as kindness, compassion, favor and love).

That said, God makes it clear Moses will not see everything:

{20} But He said, “You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live.”

This does not mean God has a physical body we cannot see (after all, we humans were allowed to see Christ’s face, at least for a time). Rather, seeing God’s face represents deep intimacy, deeper even than talking to God face-to-face.

In this case, “God’s face” means an experience of His holiness too glorious for Moses to handle; however, He will allow Moses to see a portion of His glory, as long as he takes appropriate precautions:

{21} And the LORD said, “Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. {22} So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. {23} Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.”

But first God wants Moses to take care of some unfinished business:

{34:1} And the LORD said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the first ones, and I will write on these tablets the words that were on the first tablets which you broke.

This refers back to **Exodus 32**, when the Israelites’ worship of a golden calf provoked Moses to destroy God’s original testimony.

{2} So be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai, and present yourself to Me there on the top of the mountain.

Whatever Moses was about to experience, it would have to be on his own:

{3} And no man shall come up with you, and let no man be seen throughout all the mountain; let neither flocks nor herds feed before that mountain.”

God appears to be serious about His claim that no one can see Him and live; Moses certainly takes Him seriously:

{4} So he cut two tablets of stone like the first [tablets]. Then Moses rose early in the morning and went up Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him; and he took in his hand the two tablets of stone.

There is something stirring about the image of Moses walking up a mountain in the early morning mist carrying two blank tablets of stone, almost like a blank check for God to fill out. Perhaps that very emptiness and vulnerability was a necessary precondition for God to reveal His holy name to him:

{5} Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD.

Unlike Moses’ first encounter, the name God reveals to Moses now is more than just “I am”:

{6} And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth,

That is quite a list. We could break it down as the following:

I AM.

I am God.

I am merciful.

I am gracious.

I am longsuffering (i.e., I am slow to anger).

I abound in goodness.

I abound in truth.

This is a powerful set of attributes. Whole books could be (and have been) written about each of these qualities. For this study, we will content ourselves with a few simple observations:

The first two attributes remind us of God’s transcendent nature.

The next two emphasize His kindness: He does not give us the punishment we do deserve, while He gives us the blessings we do not deserve.

The fifth item hints that God may still sometimes punish us but only as a last resort.

The last two attributes picture God as a fountain overflowing in truth and goodness.

Try to imagine what this means to Moses. He has experienced humiliation, honor, triumph, and tragedy since he first set foot in the presence of God. Now, he is responsible for thousands upon thousands of people, most of whom have shown themselves all too willing to forget (and anger) God at the least provocation!

Under the circumstances, Moses very well knew what he needed most: a deeper understanding of the holy God to whom he had entrusted his life. He needed to know that God loved the Israelites even more than he did, in order to be willing to put up with their inevitable folly. Moses doesn’t want God to ignore sin, but he does want His forgiveness to outshine His justice:

{7} keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing [the guilty], visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation."

Yes, God is just, as the Israelites recently learned to their sorrow. He will not be mocked, but He even allows the sins of parents to impact their children. Fortunately for us, God's mercy and forgiveness extend even further than His justice. In fact, His character is most fully revealed by the grace shown to us who least deserve it (cf. **I Corinthians 15:9**).

In the presence of such love and holiness, humility is the only appropriate response:

{8} So Moses made haste and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.

Moses has not forgotten his original request, however:

{9} Then he said, "If now I have found grace in Your sight, O Lord, let my Lord, I pray, go among us, even though we [are] a stiff-necked people; and pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us as Your inheritance."

God answers Moses' request for grace in the form of a covenant:

{10} And He said: "Behold, I make a covenant. Before all your people I will do marvels such as have not been done in all the earth, nor in any nation; and all the people among whom you [are] shall see the work of the LORD. For it [is] an awesome thing that I will do with you.

Unlike a contract, a covenant is an unconditional grant. However, by its very nature, it precludes the Israelites from making any other covenant that may conflict with it:

{11} Observe what I command you this day. Behold, I am driving out from before you the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite. {12} Take heed to yourself, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land where you are going, lest it be a snare in your midst.

{13} But you shall destroy their altars, break their [sacred] pillars, and cut down their wooden images {14} (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name [is] Jealous, [is] a jealous God), {15} lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and they play the harlot with their gods and make sacrifice to their gods, and [one of them] invites you and you eat of his sacrifice, {16} and you take of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters play the harlot with their gods and make your sons play the harlot with their gods.

God then rehearses other commands that flow out of His covenant:

a) Avoiding Idolatry

{17} You shall make no molded gods for yourselves.

b) Observing the Passover

{18} The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt.

c) Dedicating the Firstborn

{19} All that open the womb [are] Mine, and every male firstborn among your livestock, [whether] ox or sheep. {20} But the firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem [him], then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed.

d) Keeping the Sabbath

{21} Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; in plowing time and in harvest you shall rest.

e) Honoring God for the Harvest

{22} And you shall observe the Feast of Weeks, of the firstfruits of wheat harvest, and the Feast of Ingathering at the year's end.

God takes attendance at the three festivals mentioned in verse 22 very seriously:

{23} Three times in the year all your men shall appear before the Lord, the LORD God of Israel.

He promises to make it safe to attend:

{24} For I will cast out the nations before you and enlarge your borders; neither will any man covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year.

He also is very particular about how to treat His sacrifices:

{25} You shall not offer the blood of My sacrifice with leaven, nor shall the sacrifice of the Feast of the Passover be left until morning. {26} The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk."

Though God is generous and merciful, some of His words really are written in stone:

{27} Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write these words, for according to the tenor of these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel." {28} So he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And He wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Forty days and forty nights is a long time! As shown through Moses' experience, spending time in God's presence is not merely sustaining; it is transforming:

{29} Now it was so, when Moses came down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the Testimony [were] in Moses' hand when he came down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone while he talked with Him.

Experiencing God's glory always changes us—often in a way that makes others uncomfortable:

{30} So when Aaron and all the children of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him.

Ultimately, our experiences with God enable us to tell people what they need to hear:

{31} Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers of the congregation returned to him; and Moses talked with them. {32} Afterward all the children of Israel came near, and he gave them as commandments all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai.

As is Moses' case, however, there are times when we are unable to share our entire experience with others:

{33} And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face. {34} But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take the veil off until he came out; and he would come out and speak to the children of Israel whatever he had been commanded. {35} And whenever the children of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone, then Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with Him.

Fortunately, those who are in Christ need not experience God second-hand through a veil (cf. 2 Corinthians 3). Like Moses, we can speak to God face-to-face and be transformed into an image of His holiness.

Will we submit to this transformation?

Decision

Repentance: What "blank tablets" should you bring to God, so He can show you His character?

Action: How must you be transformed by God's presence to serve the people you lead?

Worship: Which of God's attributes most inspire you to worship?

For Next Week

Read **Romans 8**. How do the Father, Son, and Spirit work together?

Memory Verse: But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. — Romans 8:11

A.5 God's Trinity

His Transforming Unity

In Which We Discover Who the Godhead Is and How They Relate to Us

Memory Verse: But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. — Romans 8:11

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter 6. The Trinity

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter 10. The Incomprehensibility of God

Chapter 11. The Trinity of God

Chapter 28. The Sinlessness of Christ

Chapter 34. Jesus Christ as Mediator

Chapter 35. The Threefold Office of Christ

Chapter 36. The Titles of Jesus

Chapter 43. The Holy Spirit as Sanctifier

Introduction

We believe in one God, consisting of one substance (one name, one identity, and one character), which is a unity sometimes called **the Godhead**. That singular name is expressed through three distinct persons, as illustrated by this classic diagram. Theologians use the term **Trinity** to describe this paradoxical mystery, which is explicitly portrayed in the New Testament and implicitly alluded to in the Old Testament.

The Bible does not spend much time defining or defending what the Trinity is; instead, it focuses on what the Trinity does. From this vantage point, the Trinity is often referred to as **the Economic** (“**working**”) **Trinity**.

Devotion

Read **Isaiah 42**. How does Isaiah experience the Trinity?

Bible Study

Romans 8

This passage is one of many in the New Testament that mentions all three Persons of the Trinity, with a particular focus on both salvation and sanctification. We will discuss each Person separately in a future lesson, but for now, we will focus on how they work together.

{8:1} There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.

In this verse, the main attribute of Jesus (the Son) is that He saves us from condemnation (as described in the prior chapter, **Romans 7**). However, that salvation is characterized by complete submission to the Holy Spirit, which is identified with “life in Christ”:

{2} For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death.

It is important to realize that all laws—both natural and spiritual—come from God as a reflection of His undivided character. The Law that judges sin and produces death is as much a part of Him as the Law of Christ.

Although all Laws of the Lord are equally valid, they are not equally powerful:

{3} For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh,

The old Law—the Mosaic Law, which showed us what sin was and thus condemned us to death for breaking it—could never truly save us. It was limited to the flesh (what we could do through our own efforts), which would never be enough to satisfy God’s perfect Law.

Therefore, God had to go beyond what we could do by doing it Himself. Specifically, God the Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to take on the fallenness of humanity, so that we might gain His Spirit:

{4} that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

The relationship between God’s Law and His righteousness is a dense topic. There are many helpful metaphors we could use to try to explain how God works our atonement (making us righteous in His eyes). All such metaphors have their place, but the ultimate reality of our atonement is beyond our ability to fully grasp. Therefore, we need to balance our legitimate desire to understand how God works our atonement with reverent awe at the fact of our being made righteous.

For the purposes of this study, the crucial lessons are as follows:

All three members of the Trinity are involved in our salvation.

We must submit to all of them.

They each have distinct roles.

They all share the same purpose.

In particular, we must resist certain interpretations of the Trinity that imply God is divided against Himself or that teach its distinct Persons are unimportant or interchangeable. Each

member of the Trinity plays a unique role in order to fulfill their joint goal, even if we only partly understand what that role is.

Paul then shifts his focus from how the Trinity works to how we work with the Trinity:

{5} For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit.

Put another way, the members of the Trinity do not contend among themselves; our flesh contends against God's Spirit, which leads to grave consequences:

{6} For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.

The choice between death and life is really just a question of whether we will fight against, or submit to, God's Law:

{7} Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

This is what might be called **the Bad News**: not only is our flesh at war with God, but it does not have the power (*dunamai*) to do anything else. In other words, on our own we are hopelessly lost:

{8} So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

This is one of the reasons the doctrine of the Trinity is so central to the Christian life: God is not merely a transcendent Father who created the universe; He is also a Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Thus, He can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves:

{9a} But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you.

Moreover, this Spirit is identified with the man Jesus Christ, who walked among us — and we cannot have one without the other:

{9b} Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His.

In other words, we cannot pick and choose among the Persons of the Trinity the way a polytheist might choose a patron deity from his or her culture's pantheon.

We must surrender all our life to all of Him, if we want His righteousness:

{10} And if Christ [is] in you, the body [is] dead because of sin, but the Spirit [is] life because of righteousness.

Again, we see the Son and the Spirit working in tandem to bring us to righteousness, just as they partnered in the resurrection:

{11} But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

This verse helps clarify the point that the flesh being condemned is not our physical bodies. Our bodies themselves are intended to be temples of the Holy Spirit and will ultimately be redeemed; they are only corrupt when we seek to satisfy our own sinful nature ("the flesh"), rather than submitting to the Holy Spirit of God. In other words, the Spirit makes us holy by setting us apart from our fallen desires so that we can fulfill God's desires:

{12} Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. {13} For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

This paradox parallels Jesus' comment in Luke 9:24 about losing your life to save it. It is also the first time in the chapter Paul describes what we must do ("put to death the deeds of the body"), and it is important to note this act is only possible with help from the Holy Spirit.

Here is another important implication of the doctrine of the Trinity: since whatever service we might render to one Person is only possible through the work of another Person, we can never truly take any credit for ourselves. Just as the nature of the Trinity means that God meaningfully loves and serves Himself, so too it means that He can use us to serve Him.

{14} For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.

Here we transition from a discussion of the Spirit and Christ to one regarding the Spirit and the Father. Being led by the Spirit (i.e., being in Christ) means we can call God our Father, even our "Daddy" (Abba):

{15} For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father."

Wow! Think about what that means. In human adoption, we give a child our name, and we become his or her parents. In divine adoption, God also gives us His holy name (His Spirit and His character). God is thus not a dictator under whom we slaves must tremble. He is a loving Father who recognizes us as His by the presence of His Holy Spirit within us:

{16} The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,

And as His children, we share all the privileges of Christ, our brother:

{17} and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with [Him], that we may also be glorified together.

In a very real (if very limited) sense, we have the privilege of being "caught up" into the Trinity, sharing a tiny but glorious fraction of Christ's relationship with His Father and empowerment by the Spirit.

This privilege has a price, however. Not only did it greatly cost God to offer us such a privilege, but it also greatly costs us to hold such a privilege. In order to enjoy intimate fellowship with the Father, we must allow our wills, character, and purposes to conform to the holiness of the Godhead. It is a painful process, but the rewards are literally out of this world:

{18} For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy [to be compared] with the glory which shall be revealed in us.

Such hope extends beyond humankind; all of creation is promised future glory:

{19} For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. {20} For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected [it] in hope; {21} because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. {22} For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

Though we do not yet see the complete revelation of God's glory, we at least have His Spirit:

{23} Not only [that], but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

We therefore have hope:

{24} For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? {25} But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for [it] with perseverance.

We also have divine help:

{26} Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. {27} Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit [is], because He makes intercession for the saints according to [the will of] God.

As we are caught up in the work and purpose of the Spirit, we gain a new perspective on all things:

{28} And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to [His] purpose.

Specifically, we gain God's perspective regarding who we are:

{29} For whom He foreknew, He also predestined [to be] conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

In other words, God sees us as we will be: holy, in the image of Jesus.

{30} Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Amazing! You have probably heard that our purpose is to glorify God, but have you ever considered that God's goal is to glorify us?

{31} What then shall we say to these things? If God [is] for us, who [can be] against us?

He is willing to pay the ultimate price to glorify His children:

{32} He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

Forget any distorted images you may have had of Jesus needing to convince a reluctant and angry Father to forgive us. Our redemption is the intent and plan of the entire Godhead, working in concert:

{33} Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? [It is] God who justifies. {34} Who [is] he who condemns? [It is] Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

So what do we have left to fear?

{35} Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? [Shall] tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? {36} As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

In our flesh, we have reason to fear quite a lot. But in our spirit, we have pure victory:

{37} Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. {38} For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers,

nor things present nor things to come, {39} nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Amen!

Decision

Repentance: What aspect of your fleshly nature does the Spirit want to put to death?

Action: Who can you include in your life and love this week, the way the Trinity includes you?

Worship: Cry out to God as “Daddy”!

For Next Week

Read **Genesis 1**. In what ways is God our Father?

Memory Verse: So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. — Genesis 1:27

A.6 Father's Kingdom

His World, His Image

In Which God Creates His World, and Our Place in It

Memory Verse: So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. — Genesis 1:27

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	7. Creation
Chapter	8. God's Providence
Chapter	11. The Creation of Man
Chapter	12. Man as Male and Female

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	3. Immediate and Mediate General Revelation
Chapter	19. Creation
Chapter	20. Providence
Chapter	21. Miracles
Chapter	22. The Will of God
Chapter	44. Knowledge of Self and Knowledge of God
Chapter	45. Human Beings Created in the Image of God

Introduction

The overriding theme of our journey has been exploring what it means to be “baptized into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Having touched on the ontological (“being”) aspects of that holy name, we will now focus on its narrative (“doing”) aspects.

In particular, we will focus on the the narrative of creation, corruption, and redemption found throughout Scripture (and literature), as it is manifested through the Persons of the Trinity. Let us begin with the Father and creation...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 100**. What does it mean to be “the people of God”?

Bible Study

Genesis 1

The Bible begins with one of the most famous (and profound) sayings of all time:

{1:1} In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Right away, the writer asserts several crucial truths:

The universe (space and time) had a beginning.

There is a God.

God existed before the creation of the universe.

God is **omnificent**, the creator of everything — both what we experience directly (“the earth”) and what we only observe from afar (“the heavens”).

The first truth we learn in this passage is that the pre-existent God created the earth. Secondly, we notice that God initially created it at least partially unfinished:

{2a} The earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] on the face of the deep.

Creation is explicitly a process. Intriguingly enough, we find a strong Trinitarian presence in God’s creation process, through the Person of the Spirit:

{2a} And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

This is followed by the Word of God:

{3} Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.

Most Christians see this verse as a reference to Christ, who is referred to in Scripture as the Word of God and the Light of the World. We are only three verses into the Bible, and already we have all three members of the Trinity working together!

{4} And God saw the light, that [it was] good; and God divided the light from the darkness.

The sentiment, “It was good,” is repeated throughout this chapter. The word good has many different meanings and interpretations, but one useful way to think about it is as “fit for a given purpose.” This is also a useful way of thinking about holiness, as being set apart for, and uniquely suited to, a special purpose.

The light God named and called into existence is “good” because it fulfills the purposes He has for it.

One of light’s purposes is simply timekeeping:

{5} God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day.

It is intriguing to note that God does not explicitly create darkness; He merely recognizes it as the absence of light.

The proper interpretation of the word day (and indeed the entire creation story) is a matter of great controversy, especially among American evangelicals. For our purposes, however, the key point is that God is taking an orderly, methodical approach to creation.

Now, let us look at the second day:

{6} Then God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.” {7} Thus God made the firmament, and divided the waters which [were] under the firmament from the waters which [were] above the firmament; and it was

so. {8} And God called the firmament Heaven. So the evening and the morning were the second day.

Firmament is another controversial term, but the focus here appears to be on “heaven,” in the astronomical sense rather than the theological sense of the word. In these early stages of creation, notice how God does not merely add new things; He also separates things He has previously created, as in the third day:

{9} Then God said, “Let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry [land] appear”; and it was so. {10} And God called the dry [land] Earth, and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. And God saw that [it was] good.

He then goes beyond inorganic separation to organic cultivation:

{11} Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb [that] yields seed, [and] the fruit tree [that] yields fruit according to its kind, whose seed [is] in itself, on the earth”; and it was so. {12} And the earth brought forth grass, the herb [that] yields seed according to its kind, and the tree [that] yields fruit, whose seed [is] in itself according to its kind. And God saw that [it was] good. {13} So the evening and the morning were the third day.

Already, we are learning much about what God considers “good”:

He likes to split apart and name that which was previously a single unformed mass.

He enjoys creating self-replicating organisms.

Both of these statements echo (or rather, preview) the Great Commission in our second lesson.

After that brief study of biology, we return to physics — in this case, astronomy:

{14} Then God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; {15} and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth”; and it was so.

Again, there is an emphasis on timekeeping. We moderns tend to forget how essential the sun, moon, and stars were for helping our ancestors keep order.

In addition to order, there exists the concept of rulership and dominion:

{16} Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. [He made] the stars also. {17} God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth,

In a very real sense, God delegates to the sun and moon what He creates in verse 4:

{18} and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that [it was] good. {19} So the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

After the fourth day, we return to biology. This time, we read about the creation of animals, starting in the air and water:

{20} Then God said, “Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the face of the firmament of the heavens.” {21} So God created great sea creatures and every living thing that moves, with which the waters abounded, according to their kind, and every winged bird according to its kind. And God saw that [it was] good.

Like plants, animals were created to reproduce their kind; however, the animals are explicitly told to do so:

{22} And God blessed them, saying, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.”

There is a fascinating trend here, where creation moves from a passive substance to an active co-participant in God’s work:

{23} So the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

Finally we arrive at the sixth day, in which the focus is on land animals:

{24} Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature according to its kind: cattle and creeping thing and beast of the earth, [each] according to its kind”; and it was so. {25} And God made the beast of the earth according to its kind, cattle according to its kind, and everything that creeps on the earth according to its kind. And God saw that [it was] good.

We ourselves are the crowning achievement of day six:

{26} Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Here, we get another clue about the Trinity in the phrase “Let Us.” The uniqueness of mankind’s creation is also apparent. Clearly, humanity is very different from all other living creatures:

Mankind is uniquely made in the image and likeness of the Triune God.

Mankind is granted dominion over the animals.

Despite our uniqueness and dominion, God created us on the same day as cattle and “creeping things.” Perhaps He did this to show us how despite our exalted status, our actions often mirror those of cows and rats.

{27} So God created man in His [own] image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

Verse 27 captures another paradox of God’s character. On one hand, Scripture universally refers to God as “He,” and we are commanded to relate to Him as our Father (which requires wrestling with both the positive and negative legacy of our human fathers). On the other hand, God is not simply a masculine figure, as He transcends human notions of gender — both male and female are merely partial reflections of His divine nature.

In fact, only as male and female come together as one flesh can they act in His image to fill (and rule over) the earth:

{28} Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Interestingly, mankind’s dominion was originally constrained to a vegetarian diet (cf. Genesis 9:3).

{29} And God said, “See, I have given you every herb [that] yields seed which [is] on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. {30} Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that

creeps on the earth, in which [there is] life, [I have given] every green herb for food"; and it was so.

In the end, God appears exceedingly happy with the systems He has set in place:

{31} Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed [it was] very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Alas, this blissful state of holy existence will not last long. But that is a story for another day...

Decision

Repentance: Where are you failing to manifest the image of God in your life?

Action: How can you help express God's dominion over creation?

Worship: Write a poem, song, or essay expressing gratitude to God as Father and Creator.

For Next Week

Read **Genesis 3**. Why should we obey God's commands?

Memory Verse: The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. — Psalm 19:9

A.7 Man's Rebellion

His Law, Our Sin

In Which We Reject God's Dominion and Pay the Price

Memory Verse: The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. — Psalm 19:9

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	10. Angels, Satan, and Demons
Chapter	13. Sin

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	17. The Law of God
Chapter	23. Covenant
Chapter	24. Covenant of Works
Chapter	48. Satan
Chapter	50. Sin
Chapter	51. Original Sin
Chapter	52. Human Depravity
Chapter	53. Human Conscience

Introduction

When God created the world, He gave humans dominion over all the plants and animals. But it was not an unconditional grant; rather, we were given the responsibility to fulfill our role as part of His holy creation by filling the earth with His image.

And if we fail in that responsibility, the price is high...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 19**. Why does the Psalmist love God's Law?

Bible Study

Genesis 3

Our story begins in a garden in Eden, where God has placed the man and woman He created. Alas, even in paradise there can be a snake in the grass:

{3:1a} Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’”

The serpent is identified in **Revelation 12:9** as Satan, who is either disguised as or possessing the body of the snake. That would explain why this snake is “cunning,” able to talk, and undermining God:

{3:1b} And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’”

The serpent undermines God by posing a question to imply the opposite of what God says in **Genesis 2:16**:

{Gen 2:16} And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat...”

To her credit, Eve quickly corrects the serpent, though she does so at the price of being drawn into debate:

{3:2} And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; {3} but of the fruit of the tree which [is] in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’ “

She is correct that only one tree was set apart (i.e., holy). However, her version of the story is actually stricter than what God had told Adam. God’s words in Genesis 2:17 do not exclude touching and identify the tree with “the knowledge of good and evil”:

{Gen 2:17} “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

We do not know whether Eve changed what Adam told her, or Adam changed what God told him. Either way, God’s instructions seem to have lost something along the way, and the serpent is quick to exploit the opening.

The serpent begins by directly contradicting God:

{3:4} Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die.

The enemy continues his exploitation by telling a half-truth:

{5} For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

This unholy pursuit of being “like God” is the root of Adam and Eve’s fall. It also lies at the root of Satan’s fall, and it is probably our biggest struggle. As we have been discussing all along, our ultimate calling is to be like God in “name,” reflecting His image, character, and purpose. The opposite of that is setting up ourselves as God in our own name, reflecting our own knowledge, preferences, and character. In essence, we want the glory of God without having to take on the holiness of God.

Of course, the choice is rarely presented that crudely. Instead, we are most commonly tempted by something appealing that God has forbidden:

{6a} So when the woman saw that the tree [was] good for food, that it [was] pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make [one] wise, she took of its fruit and ate.

The woman fell into sin by being deceived in body (food), soul (pleasure), and spirit (wisdom). Surprisingly, Adam is not portrayed as being deceived but as simply giving in to his wife's request:

{6b} She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

Even though Eve fell first, Adam is the one held responsible for its effect on humanity, as we see in **Romans 5:12**:

{Rom 5:12} Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned

The message of Romans 5:12 is known as **the doctrine of original sin**, which is often associated with **the doctrine of total depravity**. Put simply, because all of humanity is tainted by Adam's sin, we are incapable of true goodness on our own. The Bible's teaching contradicts our modern secular belief in the innate goodness and ultimate perfectibility of humanity.

Note that total depravity does not mean we are always as bad as we can possibly be; rather, it means that we are never as good as we ought to be. Because of Adam's sin (for reasons much debated and ultimately mysterious), we are all fated to "sin, and fall short of the glory of God" (cf. Romans 3:23). That is, we fail in our calling to be images of God's name.

That failure is precisely what happened to Adam and Eve. Their eyes were indeed opened, but they did not feel like gods. Instead, they were filled with shame at the image of their naked humanity:

{7} Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they [were] naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

Their shame here is in stark contrast to their freedom earlier in Genesis:

{Gen 2:25} And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

When we are in total submission to God, we are at peace with ourselves, for His grace covers all our limitations. But the more we try to be our own god, the more acutely we feel our own shortcomings and shame despite frantic attempts to cover it up — a consequence Satan and the world never warn us about.

In many ways, shame is a foretaste of hell, since it pulls us away from God's holy presence:

{3:8} And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

In fact, this separation from God may well be the sure death God warned them about earlier.

Despite their disobedience, God thankfully continues seeking after them:

{9} Then the LORD God called to Adam and said to him, "Where [are] you?"

Adam blurts out the ugly truth—or at least part of it:

{10} So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself."

Adam's incomplete confession merely raises more questions than it answers:

{11} And He said, “Who told you that you [were] naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?”

Having been found out, Adam begins the characteristically human game of blaming someone else:

{12} Then the man said, “The woman whom You gave [to be] with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate.”

Note how in his very first attempt at rationalization, Adam manages to blame both God and Eve in one short sentence!

God obligingly asks Eve her side of the story, and she also deflects responsibility:

{13} And the LORD God said to the woman, “What [is] this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.”

The serpent apparently has nobody left to blame, so God begins his judgment on it:

{14} So the LORD God said to the serpent: “Because you have done this, You [are] cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life.

{15} And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.”

Christians generally see this as the first prophecy that a human Messiah (her “seed”) would defeat Satan—a view supported by a similar phrase in **Romans 16:20**:

{Rom 16:20a} And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly.

These verses capture the entire plot of Scripture in a nutshell: Satan tries to stamp out God’s image on the earth. Satan experiences partial success, but he ultimately fails. Instead, God’s Son becomes a man born of woman, and He destroys all Satan’s work.

While this may give hope to Eve, she does not escape responsibility for her part in the tragedy:

{16} To the woman He said: “I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children; Your desire [shall be] for your husband, And he shall rule over you.”

This difficult-to-translate verse has been the source of much controversy and confusion over the centuries. For one thing, the allusion to childbirth here and in verse 20 have led some to claim that the “forbidden fruit” Adam and Eve enjoyed was sexual intercourse, an interpretation flatly contradicted by God’s command in **Genesis 1:28** to “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth.” Alas, this interpretation remains a common misconception in popular culture, perhaps because the church has historically not done a very good job of communicating God’s positive view of sexuality.

A more serious argument teaches there are no unique leadership roles for men in marriage or in the church, since male headship only exists as part of the curse on Eve. In this view, the church should undo that curse by promoting full gender equality in every area of life and ministry.

While that may seem plausible when looking at verse 16 in isolation, this argument ignores the fact (as St. Paul points out in **1 Timothy 2:13**) that Adam was assigned specific responsibilities by God Himself before Eve was created or fell, including that of naming Eve herself. A more

consistent interpretation regarding roles of gender is that the fall introduced an unhealthy tension inside of an existing authority structure.

In fact, this is the natural consequence of Eve's setting herself—or her husband—in the place of God. Whenever we do not submit to God's dominion, we set up other things (or people) as idols in His place. Alas, idols can never fill the God-shaped hole within us. When they fall short of our expectations, we rebel and fight for control, as Eve does after the fall.

The deeper truth (which too many people on both sides of this debate overlook) is that male headship is a responsibility, not a privilege. In fact, God judges Adam for abdicating his responsibility as the head of the relationship:

{17a} Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it'...

By failing to lead his wife in God's ways, Adam's other responsibilities become much heavier:

{17b} "Cursed [is] the ground for your sake; In toil you shall eat [of] it All the days of your life. {18} Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, And you shall eat the herb of the field.

If woman's great sorrow is her labor in childbirth, man's great sorrow is his labor upon the earth. His judgment is arguably more severe because unlike Eve, Adam is promised no victory over Satan, only the release of death:

{19} In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you [are], And to dust you shall return."

For Adam's redemption, we will have to wait until the next lesson, although we do get a hint of it in God's provision of clothing:

{20} And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. {21} Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.

Clothing is but a small comfort compared to all they have lost:

{22} Then the LORD God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever"— {23} therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. {24} So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.

Adam's banishment from the garden is not a pleasant note to end on, yet it stands as a painfully accurate picture of human history. We strive to obtain happiness apart from God, but we instead find ourselves alone, naked, and ashamed in the wilderness.

This is all bad news. Thankfully, the Good News is coming...

Decision

Repentance: Where have you sought to be "as a god," deciding good and evil for yourself?

Action: How can you work with Jesus to reverse the curse in your life and in the lives of those around you?

Worship: Meditate on the price of rebellion versus the blessing of submission to God.

For Next Week

Read **1 Corinthians 15**. What does it mean to live in Christ?

Memory Verse: For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. — 1 Corinthians 15:22

A.8 Christ's Salvation

His Pain, Our Gain

In Which We Receive the Gospel and Are Saved by It

Memory Verse: For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. — 1 Corinthians 15:22

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	14. The Person of Christ
Chapter	15. The Atonement
Chapter	16. Resurrection and Ascension
Chapter	19. The Gospel Call
Chapter	20. Regeneration

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	25. The Deity of Christ
Chapter	26. The Subordination of Christ
Chapter	27. The Humanity of Christ
Chapter	30. Jesus Christ as the Only Begotten
Chapter	56. Salvation
Chapter	60. Rebirth
Chapter	61. Atonement
Chapter	73. The Last Resurrection
Chapter	74. Glorification

Introduction

Our series so far (indeed, the first half of human history) is but a prelude to the coming of Jesus Christ. In Christ, we have the Word of God made flesh, the perfect revelation of God's holiness, a tangible representative of the Trinity, and a reminder of what we were created to be.

Yet even more glorious than all of that, Christ is our Lord and has become our much-needed Savior...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 22**. What price did Jesus pay for us?

Bible Study

1 Corinthians 15

Out of the entire New Testament, we have chosen to focus on Christ as revealed in St. Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, as this book provides one of the most succinct summaries of the gospel:

{15:1} Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,

The term **gospel** simply means "good news." Right away, even before we know what the gospel is, we know the following:

Paul preached it.

The Corinthians welcomed it.

The church was established on it.

Furthermore, it is the basis of their salvation:

{2} by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you— unless you believed in vain.

To what must they hold fast?

{3} For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, {4} and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

They must cling to the gospel they received from Paul:

Christ died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again.

The gospel message can be summarized in these three simple statements — but oh, the implications!

The first thing to note is that Christ died "for our sins" (cf. 1 Peter 2:24). This is known as the doctrine of **substitutionary atonement**: the fact that in some essential yet mysterious way, Christ's death took care of our sins, similar to sacrifices on the Jewish Day of Atonement. Christ's death took away the penalty for our sins, broke the power of sin in our lives, and will ultimately take away the presence of sin altogether, ultimately restoring us to the holy relationship with God we lost in the Fall. And that is only the beginning!

Next, the fact that Jesus was buried might seem a minor point except for what happened afterwards: He rose again! Christ's resurrection places His death (and life) in a whole new light, validating His claim to be the divine the Son of God, worthy of worship, and able to forgive sins.

Finally, Paul emphasizes the gospel message takes place "according to the Scriptures." We need to know the context of everything God did, desired, and promised in the Old Testament to appreciate how Christ fulfills them in the New Testament.

On the pillars of Christ's death, resurrection, and the testimony of Scripture hang all of orthodox Christianity. Without these three truths, Christianity is nothing more than religious clichés and a cruel hoax. With them, we finally have sure knowledge of the Holy One who created and runs our universe.

The historicity of the resurrection is so crucial that Paul goes out of his way to cite his sources:

{5a} and that He was seen by Cephas

{5b} then by the twelve.

{6a} After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once

Further, most of them are still available for cross-examination:

{6b} of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.

{7a} After that He was seen by James

{7b} then by all the apostles.

Paul includes himself as proof:

{8} Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

Secular scholars sometimes like to claim that Christianity was invented by the Apostle Paul. Certainly, Paul deserves much of the credit for how non-Jews express Christianity, both culturally and theologically. However, none of that explains why a respected Jewish leader would choose to spend his life suffering on behalf of an obscure sect he once delighted in persecuting:

{9} For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

Surely, the most plausible answer is the one Paul himself repeatedly and publicly gave: his personal experience of receiving grace through an encounter with the risen Christ (cf. Acts 9):

{10} But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God [which was] with me.

The reality of the resurrection is something Paul considers central to the church's belief:

{11} Therefore, whether [it was] I or they, so we preach and so you believed. {12} Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? {13} But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

In fact, the resurrection is central to everything Paul is and does:

{14} And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching [is] empty and your faith [is] also empty. {15} Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. {16} For if [the] dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen.

The resurrection is also central to everything we hope for as Christians:

{17} And if Christ is not risen, your faith [is] futile; you are still in your sins! {18} Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. {19} If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a metaphor or fable made up to inspire religious obedience and virtuous living. It is the historical data point upon which hangs all of Christianity:

{20} But now Christ is risen from the dead, [and] has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

The firstfruits were a cause for celebration in every agrarian society. They represent the beginning of the harvest after a long summer of plowing and planting, and an end to the reliance on last year's leftovers. Among Jews, the firstfruits were also set apart for God as a holy expression of gratitude.

Paul taps into that potent imagery as well as the parallels with Adam:

{21} For since by man [came] death, by Man also [came] the resurrection of the dead. {22} For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

Here we can see the promise of eternal life for those who are in Christ, reversing the death that Adam brought on humanity.

Christ is the first to be raised from the dead, but He is far from the last:

{23} But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those [who are] Christ's at His coming.

Paul draws a parallel between Christ's past resurrection and His future second coming:

{24} Then [comes] the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.

As Western evangelicals, we have a tendency to focus on Christ as our "personal savior."

While Christ as our personal savior is an important truth, it is far from the whole truth. Here, Paul makes it clear that our individual salvation is actually part of a much larger story: Christ reestablishing the Father's Kingdom on earth, over and above all earthly powers and authorities:

{25} For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.

Christ is on a mission to establish dominion over everyone (and everything) who has rebelled against God's created order. That is the fullness of the gospel. Our individual deliverance from death is just a part of this larger cosmic struggle:

{26} The last enemy [that] will be destroyed [is] death.

{27a} For "He has put all things under His feet."

Lest we get the wrong idea, Paul clarifies that Jesus is the One to whom creation is being submitted and that He is in that sense set apart from creation itself:

{27} But when He says "all things are put under [Him]," [it is] evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted.

Yet even though He shares God's divine attributes and authority, Jesus still chooses to submit to the Father:

{28} Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

This is one of the many paradoxes of Jesus: in His divine nature, He is a full member of the Godhead, yet in His role as Son and representative member of humanity, He is submitted to the Father.

We can try our best to explain Him, but ultimately all human understanding falls short of the transcendent reality of Jesus Christ.

The reality of Christ's resurrection is something for which Paul is willing to sacrifice everything:

{29} Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? {30} And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? {31} I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. {32} If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage [is it] to me? If [the] dead do not rise, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!”

And Paul believes we should sacrifice everything for it as well:

{33} Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits.” {34} Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak [this] to your shame.

In case we have trouble understanding it, Paul does his best to illustrate what resurrection means:

{35} But someone will say, “How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?”

{36} Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. {37} And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—perhaps wheat or some other [grain]. {38} But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body.

{39} All flesh [is] not the same flesh, but [there is] one [kind] [of] flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, [and] another of birds. {40} [There are] also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial [is] one, and the [glory] of the terrestrial [is] another. {41} [There is] one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for [one] star differs from [another] star in glory.

Paul contrasts the life lived by natural means with the life lived by the empowerment of God’s spirit:

{42} So also [is] the resurrection of the dead. [The body] is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. {43} It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. {44} It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

He points us toward the example of Adam:

{45} And so it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being.” The last Adam [became] a life-giving spirit.

Paul’s allusion is to **Genesis 2:7**, where God breathed life into the dust of the earth. The life conveyed by the “last Adam” (Jesus) is similar, but it is far superior:

{46} However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.

That is, Jesus is the source of our spiritual life much as Adam was the source of our natural life. How?

{47} The first man [was] of the earth, [made] of dust; the second Man [is] the Lord from heaven. {48} As [was] the [man] of dust, so also [are] those [who are] [made] of dust; and as [is] the heavenly [Man], so also [are] those [who are] heavenly.

Put another way, Adam, our ancestors, or any other human can only give us earthly life, since they themselves are merely part of the earth.

Christ did not only come from heaven. Because He is the Lord of heaven, He has the ability and authority to remake us in His holy image:

{49} And as we have borne the image of the [man] of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly [Man].

This, then, is the ultimate reason Jesus came: to glorify God the Father through His life, death, and resurrection, that we (and all creation) might someday bear the holy image of Christ.

We cannot experience that holiness as we currently are:

{50} Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.

Fortunately for us, we will be transformed:

{51} Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— {52} in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. {53} For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal [must] put on immortality. {54} So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

Hallelujah!

{55} “O Death, where [is] your sting? O Hades, where [is] your victory?” {56} The sting of death [is] sin, and the strength of sin [is] the law. {57} But thanks [be] to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

May God grant us grace to live the uncertain present in light of our certain future:

{58} Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Amen.

Decision

Repentance: Where does Christ need to further establish His reign in your life?

Action: How can you better manifest Christ’s image in the earth?

Worship: What does Christ’s death and resurrection reveal about the depths of God’s character (e.g., His wisdom, justice, and love)?

For Next Week

Read **John 16**. Why does Jesus promise to send the Holy Spirit?

Memory Verse: And when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. — John 16:1

A.9 Spirit's Conviction

Connect, Chastise, Convey

In Which Jesus Sends the Comforter and We Are Convicted by Him

Memory Verse: And when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment. — John 16:1

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	29. Gifts of the Holy Spirit (I): General Questions
Chapter	30. Gifts of the Holy Spirit (II): Specific Gifts

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	37. The Deity of the Holy Spirit
Chapter	38. The Personality of the Holy Spirit
Chapter	39. The Internal Testimony of the Holy Spirit
Chapter	40. The Illumination of the Holy Spirit
Chapter	42. The Holy Spirit as Comforter

Introduction

This week, we move from the Father and the Son to the third Person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. We will also continue our theme of God restoring His image by saving us from our rebellion. As usual, there is a heavy price to pay...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 51**. What does conviction feel like?

Bible Study

John 16

Our story takes place during the upper room discourse, Jesus' after-dinner speech between the Last Supper and when he goes to Gethsemane to pray and be arrested. As his final conversation with the disciples, it is fraught with foreboding:

{16:1} "These things I have spoken to you, that you should not be made to stumble. {2} They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service.

Life is about to get much more difficult for the disciples not because of anything they have done, but because of who Jesus is:

{3} And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me.

Jesus is not surprised by this, nor should they be:

{4a} But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them.

In fact, Jesus knew this was coming all along, but He held back until now:

{4b} “And these things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.

But now, everything is about to change:

{5} “But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, ‘Where are You going?’

Here Jesus speaks of His impending death, a topic the disciples would rather not think about, much less talk about. But Jesus insists on bringing it up, even though He knows it pains them:

{6} But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.

Why then does He force the issue? He knows that His departure from them is an essential step to something even better:

{7} Nevertheless I tell you the truth. It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.

We do not know exactly why Jesus had to leave (i.e., die) before the Holy Spirit could come, but it is clear that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit in much the same way the Father sends Jesus. Put another way, the Holy Spirit will represent Jesus to us much like Jesus represented the Father to the disciples.

How will the Holy Spirit do that?

{8} And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment...

Of all the roles the Holy Spirit will play (and there are many), Jesus chooses to focus on how He helps us see and believe the truth. Perhaps surprisingly, Jesus talks about the impact the Holy Spirit will have on the world in general, not just the disciples or the church.

Specifically, the Holy Spirit will convict the world in regards to the following:

Sin

Righteousness

Judgment

That is a bit vague as it stands, so Jesus expands on what conviction means for each of those:

{9} of sin, because they do not believe in Me...

First of all, Jesus makes it clear that the fundamental “sin” (singular) the Holy Spirit is concerned about is failing to “believe in” Jesus. While all “sins” (plural) can be considered falling short of God’s glory (His character and purpose), this passage implies that the root of those sins is failing to recognize who Jesus truly is and that the only solution is to place our trust in Jesus, not in ourselves (or other gods).

We might also infer from this passage that failing to believe His testimony about Jesus could be the one “unforgivable sin” against the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 12:31–32), since that would be thwarting His primary purpose.

{10} of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more...

There are many ways to interpret verse 10, but the simplest interpretation is perhaps that with Jesus no longer physically present, we no longer have His direct example of what righteous living looks like. Instead, we must rely on the Holy Spirit speaking through the Scriptures, through the Body of Christ, and to our hearts directly.

{11} of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.

The Greek word translated as judgment means literally “crisis.” A crisis is a time when illusions and excuses are stripped away, and we are forced to make difficult choices in the light of cold reality. Christ’s death and resurrection represent a judgment on the existing world ruler, which means we need to choose sides; indifference is no longer an option.

Of course, the Holy Spirit’s conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment offers just a taste of what Jesus has in mind, but they are all the disciples can handle at the moment:

{12} “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear [them] now.

In fact, one of the main reasons we need the Holy Spirit is to pick up where Jesus left off:

{13a} However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth;

Here is the first time Jesus uses the term spirit to refer to the Comforter, specifically as the “Spirit of truth,” which is similar to Jesus’ identity as the way, the truth, and the life (cf. **John 14:6**). This fits nicely with the three reproofs above; in Jewish culture, the idea of truth is tightly linked to the idea of conviction. For them, it is impossible to believe a truth without acting upon it. As such, the Holy Spirit does not merely tell us truth; He leads us to live truth out.

Jesus goes on to explain that it is not the Spirit’s own truth He is sharing:

{13b} for He will not speak on His own [authority], but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come.

As Jesus only did what He saw the Father doing, the Spirit only speaks what He hears from Christ. Being set apart for a single, specific purpose may be one reason the Spirit is called Holy. The Spirit’s job is to listen to the heart of God and disclose it to us, Christ’s disciples.

Just as the Son manifests the Father, so the Spirit reflects the Son:

{14} He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare [it] to you.

The Son seeks the Father’s glory, and the Spirit brings glory to the Son. That implies nobody is seeking the glory of the Spirit. But the Spirit is okay with that; his purpose is to testify to Jesus.

In fact, all the gifts and fruit of the Spirit are not meant to call attention to Himself; they are meant to glorify Christ by building up His body. Woe to those who seek the Spirit’s power for selfish purposes!

If we receive the Spirit in the right way, He will grant us all the treasures of the Father, which we are going to need while Jesus is away:

{15} All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare [it] to you. {16} “A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father.”

Some of the disciples do not understand what Jesus is saying:

{17} Then [some] of His disciples said among themselves, “What is this that He says to us, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’; and, ‘because I go to the Father’?” {18} They said therefore, “What is this that He says, ‘A little while’? We do not know what He is saying.”

Alas, (like us) they respond to their confusion by talking amongst themselves rather than asking Jesus to explain what He means. Fortunately, He knows what is on their hearts:

{19} Now Jesus knew that they desired to ask Him, and He said to them, “Are you inquiring among yourselves about what I said, ‘A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me’?”

Though Jesus’ interpretation is not pleasant, it is reassuring:

{20} Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. {21} A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. {22} Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.

This is an encouraging promise: though we no longer have the joy of His physical presence, we can experience the presence of His joy!

More than that, we are promised to have the same access to the Father:

{23} “And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you.

The key is being in the holy name of Jesus. There is a deep spiritual mystery at work here. Just as Christ’s death must precede His resurrection and ascension (and the disciple’s sorrow must precede their joy), so too must the conviction of the Spirit precede our authority to ask anything of the Father.

Jesus’ promise that the Father will give them anything they ask in His name produces a joy the disciples have yet to experience:

{24} Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.

They are only now becoming able to comprehend all that Jesus is saying:

{25} “These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; but the time is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but I will tell you plainly about the Father.

The ultimate goal of Jesus is not to draw the disciples to Himself, but to His Father:

{26} In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I shall pray the Father for you; {27} for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from God. {28} I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father.”

Jesus’ words here seem to finally connect with the disciples:

{29} His disciples said to Him, “See, now You are speaking plainly, and using no figure of speech! {30} Now we are sure that You know all things, and have no need that anyone should question You. By this we believe that You came forth from God.”

They may be overly optimistic about their level of understanding, however:

{31} Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? {32a} Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone.

Jesus is not worried about Himself, since He knows He is never alone:

{32b} And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.

Instead, He expresses concern for us:

{33} These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

Jesus has won the victory. He has not promised to spare us from trouble, but He has promised to give us His peace in the midst of it.

Are we willing to pay the price of conviction in order to receive peace and joy unspeakable?

Decision

Repentance: Where do you need to submit to the Spirit’s judgment and break away from the world?

Action: Ask the Holy Spirit what truth(s) about Jesus He wants to show you.

Worship: Thank God for everything the Spirit has brought you.

For Next Week

Read **1 Peter 1**. What does holiness look like?

Memory Verse: but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. — 1 Peter 1:15

A.10 Self's Sanctification

His Call, Our Destiny

In Which We Are Set Apart for Obedience and Suffering To Become Holy

Memory Verse: but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. — 1 Peter 1:15

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	21. Conversion (Faith and Repentance)
Chapter	22. Justification and Adoption
Chapter	23. Sanctification (Growth in Likeness to Christ)

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	46. Human Beings as Body and Soul
Chapter	47. Human Beings as Flesh and Spirit
Chapter	64. Faith
Chapter	65. Saving Faith
Chapter	66. Justification by Faith
Chapter	67. Faith and Works
Chapter	68. Repentance
Chapter	69. Merit and Grace
Chapter	70. Perseverance of the Saints

Introduction

This week, we will round out our discussion on salvation and conviction by focusing on sanctification, the process of becoming holy. The process of sanctification includes both what God has already done as well as what we choose to allow Him to do. The overall idea is forming God's character and purpose in humanity the way He originally intended, before we rebelled against Him.

The process of sanctification is central to our calling as disciples and leaders, yet it is often poorly understood. Let us dig into God's Word to explore what this process involves...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 25**. How does God treat those who wait upon Him?

Bible Study

1 Peter 1

We will now read from the Apostle Peter:

{1:1} Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia,

The idea of “pilgrims” could refer to the Jewish diasporas, but it more likely includes all Christians who are in some sense set apart from the other nations on Earth (cf. 1 Peter 2:11).

{2a} elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father

The phrase **election** is associated with **the doctrine of predestination**, which in turn is primarily associated with Calvinist (or Reformed) theology. It touches on many deep (and contentious) philosophical and theological issues, but the core concept is that God chooses who will belong to Him, and He foreknows who will choose to follow Him. These concepts can be difficult to reconcile with the concepts of free will and moral responsibility, yet the Bible clearly teaches all of them.

The best response to this paradox is simply to place equal value on everything the Bible teaches, even if our human minds cannot quite fit them all together. Also, keep in mind that this passage is less concerned with how we are saved than why we are saved:

{2b} in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ...

In other words, we have been set apart by the Holy Spirit to obey Christ and to be cleansed by His blood.

{2c} Grace to you and peace be multiplied.

Grace is a very rich concept, as is peace, but here they may just play the role of an opening benediction. Peter’s main focus is on what God has done:

{3} Blessed [be] the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

Peter links being “begotten” (our new birth) to Christ’s resurrection. While we do not know exactly how it works, Christ’s death and resurrection opened the door for us to experience God as our Father. As we discussed in Lesson A.5, Christ did not have to contend against God the Father to allow us intimacy with Him; the passage makes it clear that it is the Father’s mercy which made this all possible.

This living hope is intimately tied to a future promise of absolute, indestructible holiness:

{4} to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you...

That hope is present with us here and now, even while we wait for His return:

{5} who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

As Peter states, “the power of God” is appropriated through faith, which allows us to rejoice even when the going is tough:

{6} In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials...

Why might such testing through “various trials” be necessary?

{7} that the genuineness of your faith, [being] much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ...

It is difficult to accept that we need to suffer. Many Christians like to think the only reason we are saved is so that we may go to heaven, and they would prefer to get there as soon as possible. However, God’s primary goal is not our comfort; it is His glory, which is revealed through our holiness. As such, He delights in faith that has been tested, like gold refined in a furnace.

He is especially glorified by faith that perseveres in the absence of sight:

{8} whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see [Him], yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory...

Salvation is not the whole story; salvation is merely the culmination of a lifelong story of faith:

{9} receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of [your] souls.

This salvation of our souls is one many before us have longed to grasp:

{10} Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace [that would come] to you, {11} searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

But the prophets could only prepare the way for us:

{12} To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things which angels desire to look into.

We should not take such knowledge lightly:

{13} Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest [your] hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ...

Even though our salvation may have been predestined, it does not mean we can simply wait passively for God to take care of everything. We must have prepared minds and calm spirits. Not in order to win salvation by our own efforts, but in order to hold fast to the hope of God’s grace being revealed to us.

For it is this hope (and grace) which enables us to obey:

{14} as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, [as] in your ignorance...

Peter contrasts the obedient life (the hope of Christ’s glorious character being revealed in us through our faith and His grace) with our past life (being conformed to our sinful desires). Moreover, he attributes this conformity to “ignorance” (i.e., the lack of a true understanding of who God is and what He wants for us).

The implication is that if we had a clear-sighted understanding of God's purpose—i.e., His holiness—we would naturally obey Him. As such, our sinful follies reflect a deficiency in either our minds or our spirits.

Therefore, the key to our being holy is understanding that God Himself is holy:

{15} but as He who called you [is] holy, you also be holy in all [your] conduct, {16} because it is written, "Be holy, for I am holy."

As we submit to God's Fatherhood, we too become set apart in the holy image of Christ:

{17} And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay [here] in fear; {18} knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, [like] silver or gold, from your aimless conduct [received] by tradition from your fathers, {19} but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

Christ was set apart for us, to bring us to God:

{20} He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you {21} who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

Why was Christ manifest for us?

{22} Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart...

Peter seems to suggest that sanctification is a well-defined progression:

Submit to the Spirit.

Obey truth.

Purify our souls.

Love our brothers and sisters, with sincerity (phileo).

Love each other fervently, with divine purity (agape).

Love is both the means and the measure of our sanctification. The move from merely human love to divine love is the ultimate evidence that we have been "born from above":

{23} having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever...

The incorruptible seed is Christ, the Word (logos) of God. Our love is a sign (cf. **John 13:34-35**) that we have been loved by Him and born of Him. Only love like that will endure:

{24} because "All flesh [is] as grass, And all the glory of man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, And its flower falls away...

Any time we submit ourselves to the lusts of the flesh (or any human glory), we merely hasten our own destruction. The pleasures of this world grow less satisfying each time we indulge in them, even as they dim our minds and confuse our spirits.

Submitting to the flesh contrasts greatly with conforming to the holy Word of God, where every investment pays dividends for eternity:

{25} But the word of the LORD endures forever." Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you.

These are certainly words to live by!

Decision

Repentance: Where are you still in bondage to “former lusts”?

Action: How can you clear your mind and calm your spirit to more effectively hope in God?

Worship: What might it look like to be reborn in God’s image, sharing in His holiness?

For Next Week

Read **Ephesians 4**. What does it mean to be the body of Christ?

Memory Verse: From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. — Ephesians 4:16

A.11 Christ's Body

The Church

In Which We Become the Church, as We Grow into Christ Our Head via His Gifts

Memory Verse: From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. — Ephesians 4:16

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	26. The Nature of the Church
Chapter	28. The Lord's Supper

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	75. The Apostles
Chapter	76. The Church
Chapter	77. The Marks of a True Church
Chapter	86. The Fruit of the Spirit
Chapter	87. Love
Chapter	88. Hope

Introduction

Continuing the theme of sanctification, we will now explore how we are disciplined into the holy name of Christ through His body by His Spirit. The body of Christ is the Father's principle vehicle for forming His kingdom. Specifically, we will see how the fact that we serve one God requires us to worship Him as one church.

Devotion

Read **Psalm 122**. Why do we gather together as Christians?

Bible Study

Ephesians 4

In previous chapters of Paul's epistle to the church at Ephesus, he talks about the glorious work of the Father in calling us to His holy purpose. He now asks us to live up to that calling:

{4:1} I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called...

So, what does such a walk require?

{2} with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love... Apparently, the key to walking with Christ is not intelligence, courage, or religious observance. Instead, walking with Christ requires being willing to suffer in order to maintain healthy relationships:

{3} endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Keeping unity is difficult. Paul knows that it requires immense humility, self-control, and patience to maintain a healthy community of fallen human beings, but he also knows that it is essential:

{4} There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; {5} one Lord, one faith, one baptism; {6} one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

For Paul, the unity of the church is not so much an ideal as it is a brute fact, grounded in the reality that God Himself is One.

In a polytheistic world, it made sense to have many different temples and worshipping communities centered around different deities. We, however, serve a single God, who has no division or conflict within Himself, who is so completely sovereign that He leaves room for no other gods.

He has given us only one Son, into whose name we must be baptized. We all share the same faith in Him and share the same hope for eternal life.

In short, everyone who worships Jesus as Lord has been set apart as members of one body — whether we like it or not!

{7} But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift.

Paul ties Christ's gifting into His ascension, via **Psalm 68:18**:

{8} Therefore He says: "When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, And gave gifts to men."

This mirrors our earlier lesson on **John 16**, where Christ says He must die and ascend to heaven in order to "gift" us the Holy Spirit:

{9} (Now this, "He ascended"—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? {10} He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)

So what gifts does He give us to help fulfill His mission to "fill all things"?

{11} And He Himself gave some [to be] apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers...

These roles are sometimes referred to as "church offices" or the "five-fold ministry gifts"; frequently the "elders" (from Titus) and "deacons" (from Timothy) are also included.

The nature and relevance of these roles is the subject of much debate between various Christian traditions. The **Cessationist** tradition claims that apostles and prophets are no longer needed now that we have a written New Testament. **Charismatics**, who believe the Holy Spirit still works the same today as He did back then, argue that all five roles mentioned by Paul are essential. There also exists disagreement about whether "pastors and teachers" refers to one office or two as well as whether some offices are superior to others.

One reason for the confusion about verse 11 is that relatively general Greek words are used to indicate very specific Christian concepts, but the New Testament writers never produced a glossary defining exactly what they meant. Thus, we need to infer a definition from the way they used those terms, and various groups of people infer different interpretations.

The most important thing to realize is that all the gifts were given to us by Christ, for our benefit and His glory. As such, our primary task is to understand what His purpose is in giving us these gifts, so that we may ensure we are accomplishing that purpose (regardless of what terminology or mechanisms we use).

To that end, here is one possible breakdown of these roles:

Role	Literally	Function
Apostle	“one sent forth”	Lays the foundation for the church
Prophet	“one who brings forth hidden things”	Speaks God’s truth to the church
Evangelist	“bringer of good tidings”	Preaches the gospel to save sinners
Pastor	“shepherd”	Watches over God’s people
Teacher	“imparters of instruction”	Instills doctrine in Christ’s followers

As general concepts, these roles are relatively non-controversial, but they are clearly necessary. Disagreements typically arise over the level of supernatural power and spiritual authority associated with each of these roles as well as if and how their potency may have changed over the course of church history.

Perhaps the best way to resolve those questions is to focus on why He gave these gifts:

{12} for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ...

Verse 12 contains two revolutionary ideas:

Church offices (i.e., leaders) do not exist to “do” ministry! Rather, their role is to equip all of us (those being sanctified) for ministry.

The purpose of the gifts is not so much individual perfection (much less personal happiness) as it is building up the entire body of Christ.

The main reason there is so much concern and controversy over these offices is the fear of their being used and abused for personal gain and glory. Tragically, this has happened far too often in church history. If we truly understood and lived out Paul's teaching here, we would see that the ultimate measure of a leader's effectiveness is actually how well their followers manifest holiness, ministry, and maturity.

In short, the key is realizing that the "gifts" in question are not the specific anointing for apostlehood or prophecy. Rather, this verse is actually best read as Christ giving these people as gifts to His body. In other words, the apostles are not the recipients of a gift, they are the gift! Therefore, as the whole body of Christ, we receive and benefit from those gifts as they are used for His glory.

To what end do we receive His gifts?

{13} till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...

The goal is that all of us together need to not only trust in Christ; we need to know Him and be filled with His holy name.

For Paul, holiness is not a solitary ideal to be pursued in hermit-like isolation. On the contrary, it is something we achieve as a community, through the workings of the leaders God has gifted us with.

Why must we pursue holiness together? Because alone, we are far too vulnerable:

{14} that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting...

Together, we can correct and complete each other:

{15} but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ...

Submitting to Christ as our head utterly depends upon our being joined together with His body. There is no room in Scripture for "Lone Ranger" Christians:

{16} from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love.

Not only do we need the body, but the body needs us. Only as each of us ministers to one other with the gifts God gave us (as the gifts God made us!) can He build His kingdom in all of us.

We desperately need to be reminded of our inter-dependency, as we certainly cannot learn it from our culture:

{17} This I say, therefore, and testify in the Lord, that you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles walk, in the futility of their mind...

Because they lack a vision of whom God truly is and what He desires for them, the Gentiles wander into the follies of the flesh:

{18} having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart; {19} who, being past feeling, have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness.

Thankfully, we are different (at least in theory):

{20} But you have not so learned Christ,

{21} if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught by Him, as the truth is in Jesus...

We should know better:

{22} that you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, {23} and be renewed in the spirit of your mind,

And we should do better:

{24} and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness.

Holiness is intimately connected to being in right relationship with those around us:

{25} Therefore, putting away lying, "[Let] each one [of you] speak truth with his neighbor," for we are members of one another.

Even when things go wrong, we should submit to a higher standard:

{26} "Be angry, and do not sin": do not let the sun go down on your wrath, {27} nor give place to the devil.

We will discuss anger and forgiveness much more in our next series, but the key lesson for now is that we should not be slaves to our own feelings. Instead, we should seek to bless others:

{28} Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with [his] hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. {29} Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

When we do so, we will also bless God Himself:

{30} And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.

In this way, we will manifest the holiness of Christ rather than the lusts of our flesh:

{31} Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. {32} And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Amen.

Decision

Repentance: Which areas of your life are disconnected from the body of Christ?

Action: Where might God want you to be a gift to the body of Christ?

Worship: What gifts can you thank God for today?

For Next Week

For next week, read **Revelation 20–21**. What strikes you most about heaven?

Memory Verse: And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.” — Revelation 21:3

A.12 Christ's Return

His Judgment, Our Reward

In Which Christ Comes Back to Judge and Remake the Earth, and We Receive Our Reward

Memory Verse: And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God." — Revelation 21:3

Assigned Reading

Wayne Grudem – **Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings**

Chapter	31. The Return of Christ: When and How?
Chapter	33. The Final Judgment and Eternal Punishment
Chapter	34. The New Heaven and New Earth

R. C. Sproul – **Essential Truths of the Christian Faith**

Chapter	98. The Return of Christ
Chapter	100. Heaven
Chapter	101. The Beatific Vision
Chapter	102. Hell

Introduction

The End. Christ's return is the completion of our theology. Faith will be made sight, all nations will bow before Him, and we will dwell in the fullness of the Father's eternal presence as His kingdom comes at last. Our sin will be no more, for the Spirit's work of salvation and sanctification is finished as His bride is united with His holiness.

However, not everyone will be happy about it...

Devotion

Read **Psalm 75**. How does God judge?

Bible Study

Revelation 20–21

Revelation is probably the most misinterpreted book of the Bible. Since Christ left, practically every generation of Christians has been certain that Christ would return in their lifetime. Their error should make us wary of similar claims today.

However, even a stopped clock is right twice a day. Someday history really will come to an end. Christ will return; not as a humble babe, but as a conquering king:

{20:1} Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, having the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. {2} He laid hold of the dragon, that serpent of old, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years; {3} and he cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal on him, so that he should deceive the nations no more till the thousand years were finished. But after these things he must be released for a little while.

He will also return as a righteous judge:

{4} And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then [I saw] the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received [his] mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years. {5} But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This [is] the first resurrection. {6} Blessed and holy [is] he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years.

This thousand-year period (millennium) is a subject of great debate. Does it refer to a future time of Christ's earthly rule over sinful man, the present Church Age, or something else entirely? Alas, we probably will not know for sure until it is all over:

{7} Now when the thousand years have expired, Satan will be released from his prison {8} and will go out to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together to battle, whose number [is] as the sand of the sea. {9} They went up on the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from God out of heaven and devoured them. {10} The devil, who deceived them, was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet [are]. And they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

The important thing is that someday all uncertainty and confusion will be over because God Himself will straighten everything out:

{11} Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them.

Christ's installation as king truly is the end of the world. The old order of creation will be completely undone, including death itself:

{12a} And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is [the Book] of Life.

The Bible repeatedly hints at two kinds of judgment, represented here by different books: **The Book of Life** is a recurring theme in Scripture, and in the New Testament is associated with believers in Christ. The other books are often called **the Books of Works**:

{12b} And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.

In that context, “the dead” may refer to those who are not believers in Christ and are thus “dead in their sins” (cf. **Colossians 2:13**).

There is no escaping God’s judgment:

{13} The sea gave up the dead who were in it, and Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them. And they were judged, each one according to his works.

Intriguingly, Death itself gets judged as well:

{14} Then Death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.

Passages like this are sometimes misunderstood as implying that we are graded “on a curve” and that heaven is for those whose good deeds outweigh their bad. Yet, while the dead are explicitly judged by the Books of Works, the passage does not mention the consequences of that judgment. As far as we can see, only Death and Hell are punished at this time.

Conversely, the penalty for not being in the Book of Life is extremely severe:

{15} And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.

On the other hand, those who submit to the name of Christ will experience the fullness of His renewed kingdom:

{21:1} Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea.

The sea often symbolizes trouble and danger, neither of which are part of the new creation:

{2} Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Unlike pagan religions, which view history as cyclical or never-changing, Christianity is inherently progressive: we begin in a garden, but we end in a city. We start with God as our Father-Creator-King, but we ultimately find our consummation in Christ as our Savior-Sanctifier-Husband.

{3} And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God.

The curse of **Genesis 3** is finally lifted, and we can again dwell unashamed in God’s life-giving presence:

{4} And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.”

This glorious vision is no mere fantasy, but it is a divine promise—in writing, no less:

{5} Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write, for these words are true and faithful.”

We can trust in that promise and that vision, for both are rooted directly in the character of Christ:

{6} And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts.

Christ is our source and our destination, the cure for our disease, and the satisfaction of all our hungers. As His heirs, everything He has is ours:

{7} He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.

However, not everyone will enjoy the riches of Christ's promises:

{8} But the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death."

Christ is coming. The same God who created the universe, whom we rebelled against, will reestablish a new heaven and a new earth. Those whose names are written in the Book of Life will enjoy eternity in His presence as His eternal bride, the way life was originally meant to be lived:

{9} Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls filled with the seven last plagues came to me and talked with me, saying, "Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb's wife." {10} And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God...

In the holiness of Jerusalem, we will no longer fall short of God's glory:

{11} having the glory of God. Her light [was] like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal. {12} Also she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are [the names] of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel: {13} three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

The holy city will be built on the foundation of the apostles:

{14} Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. {15} And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall. {16} The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal. {17} Then he measured its wall: one hundred [and] forty-four cubits, [according] to the measure of a man, that is, of an angel.

Its structure is described as rich beyond our imagination:

{18} The construction of its wall was [of] jasper; and the city [was] pure gold, like clear glass. {19} The foundations of the wall of the city [were] adorned with all kinds of precious stones: the first foundation [was] jasper, the second sapphire, the third chalcedony, the fourth emerald, {20} the fifth sardonyx, the sixth sardius, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, and the twelfth amethyst. {21} The twelve gates [were] twelve pearls: each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city [was] pure gold, like transparent glass.

The city's greatest treasure cannot be seen:

{22} But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

Even though the city lacks a sun or a moon, we will be able to see everything in His light:

{23} The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb [is] its light. {24} And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth bring their glory and honor into it. {25} Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). {26} And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it.

Will you be ready for His return?

{27} But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Decision

Repentance: To which of the sins in **Revelation 21:8** are you most susceptible?

Action: Are you sure your name is in the Book of Life? If not, how will you make sure?

Worship: Praise God in advance for the glory of His eternal kingdom.

For Next Session

Our next module ("Live Wisely") will focus on conforming our character to that of Christ's. To prepare, read through the book of **Proverbs** and meditate on how wisdom is contrasted with folly, mockery, and simplicity.

B. Live Wisely

“Be Holy”

B. Live Wisely

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. — Ephesians 1:3–4

In Part A, we explored holiness from God's point of view. This theological perspective helped us understand the grand narrative of Scripture, from creation through corruption to redemption.

Now we shift our focus to human holiness. How can we bear the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit? What are the spiritual blessings that God chose for us to receive? What does it look like to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (cf. **Mark 12:30**)?

The answers to those questions can be summarized in a single word: **wisdom**. God's wisdom can be understood as **the articulation of His holiness**, just as God's glory is the manifestation of His holiness. Wisdom is something God communicates to us in order to reveal both His holiness and ours.

If we want to become holy as God is holy, we must first become wise.

Assigned Reading

Students should read both of the following:

Back to Virtue: Traditional Moral Wisdom for Modern Moral Confusion by Peter Kreeft

Foundations of Wisdom: The Book of Proverbs by Dick Hockett

B.1 From Humanism to Wisdom

In Which Our Character Is Conformed to God's Name via the Pursuit of Wisdom

Memory Verse: The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction. — Proverbs 1:7

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Introduction: Is Virtue Out of Date?

Chapter 2. Western Culture on the Couch: A Spiritual Psychoanalysis

Chapter 4. Justice, Wisdom, Courage, and Moderation: The Four Cardinal Virtues

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 1. Wisdom's Role in God's Plan

Chapter 2. Introduction to Proverbs

Introduction

The goal of character formation is to bring our whole person into alignment with the whole name of God, His identity, character, and purpose—i.e., His holiness. We can define the whole person using the “triploid” model pictured here, which encompasses:

Our spirit at the center,

Working through our heart, soul, and mind (cf. **Mark 12:30**),

Together producing emotion, reason, and decision

Manifesting in the actions of our body

While there are other ways to picture the human psyche, this diagram helps us understand the role of wisdom in character formation—and how we fall short...

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 1**. Why is wisdom so important?

Bible

Psalm 107

We begin in the Psalms, where we find a beautiful illustration of many themes which will shape our study of wisdom:

{107:1a} Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for [He is] good!

The first and most essential truth we must confront is that God is good. This statement may seem cliché, yet the Psalmist chose to command the Israelites to appreciate it. While God’s goodness may sound nice in theory, its practical implications are often difficult to swallow.

Our difficulty in trusting God’s continual goodness may be why the Psalmist reminds us of His constant nature:

{1b} For His mercy [endures] forever.

In Lesson A.6, we defined goodness as “fit for a good purpose.” If God is truly good, then that means He is perfectly suited to His role as ruler of the universe. Everything He does is completely in line with His purpose: glorifying His holy name through all creation — including us:

{2} Let the redeemed of the LORD say [so], Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy, {3} And gathered out of the lands, From the east and from the west, From the north and from the south.

Unfortunately, we mortals do not so easily accept our role as His creature. We would rather take over God’s role as arbiters of our own destiny! Nonetheless, our purpose is to be conformed to His image, another concept which sounds nice in the abstract but can be quite painful in reality.

Because we find it so difficult to be conformed to His image, we usually conform ourselves to a substitute image. We may recognize and work on our imperfections, but we do so only with respect to the higher desires of our own spirit. This selfish behavior reflects that which Freud called the “super-ego.”

Our innate desires are the result of many influences: our upbringing, culture, education, and religious instruction. These influences do hold some value, at least in terms of societal benefit. However, they are ultimately human constructions and thus fall short of the fullness of God’s character.

The practice of measuring ourselves against human standards—of claiming “man is the measure of all things”⁴—is usually labeled **humanism** (though the term has other, more benign uses). As Christians, we reject the philosophy of humanism in our minds, yet we often practice it in our hearts.

In particular, Proverbs identifies three common ways we fall short of God’s wisdom:

The **Simple**, who ignores wisdom because it is too difficult to follow

The **Mocker**, who trusts in his or her own wisdom

The **Fool**, who scorns both divine and human wisdom

The relationship among the Simple, the Mocker, and the Fool is summarized below:

Attribute	Simple	Mocker	Fool

⁴ Attributed to Protagoras, an early Greek philosopher

Fear of the Lord	"God cannot hold me accountable, because I did not know better."	"God cannot hold me accountable, because I am not subject to his stupid ways."	"God cannot hold me accountable, because he does not know what I do or think."
Mocker	Follows Mockers	Is a Mocker	N/A
Folly	Inherits folly	Gains folly due to God's opposition	Has one or more follies.
Destructive path	Waywardness	God's opposition	Complacency
Solution	Prudence	Humility	Understanding
Power of gospel	Faith	Hope	Love

Adapted from Foundations of Wisdom by Dick Hockett. Used by permission.

We can roughly map these characters onto our personality chart above. For example:

Mockers are proud of their ability to reason.

The Simple hate to reason; they just want a decision, preferably from someone else (usually a Mocker).

Fools fail to follow even their own reasons and decisions, due to their emotional damage.

We all fall into each of these three categories at different times, though most of us tend towards one more than the others.

These types represent the human desire to live life on our terms, rather than to submit to God's instruction. In contrast, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (cf. Proverbs 1:7).

God's purpose is to form His holiness in us, which ultimately is our only route to true happiness, holiness, and honor. Yet to form us into His image, He must first break us of the idolatry of self.

This breaking is what we see in Psalm 107. God in his mercy deals with each of these three idolatries in turn, starting with the Simple:

- {4} They wandered in the wilderness in a desolate way; They found no city to dwell in.
- {5} Hungry and thirsty, Their soul fainted in them.

The Simple wander directionless in the world without wisdom until their trust in their own simplicity gives out. But if they have sufficient faith in God's unseen wisdom to cry to the Lord instead of turning to a Mocker, He will show them the right way to go and will establish them in a safe place:

{6} Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He delivered them out of their distresses. {7} And He led them forth by the right way, That they might go to a city for a dwelling place.

{8} Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! {9} For He satisfies the longing soul, And fills the hungry soul with goodness.

Next, we see how God must deal with the Mocker:

{10} Those who sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, Bound in affliction and irons — {11} Because they rebelled against the words of God, And despised the counsel of the Most High, {12} Therefore He brought down their heart with labor; They fell down, and [there was] none to help.

Because the Mocker's heart is full of pride, God in His mercy must afflict them so that they lose faith in themselves. Likewise, if they come to hope in God's wisdom instead of escaping to folly, He can deliver them:

{13} Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He saved them out of their distresses. {14} He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, And broke their chains in pieces.

{15} Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! {16} For He has broken the gates of bronze, And cut the bars of iron in two.

Finally, we come to the Fool, who in modern terms can be described as an addict—someone whose devotion is focused on a self-destructive substance or behavior (cf. **Proverbs 26:11**) instead of on wisdom:

{17} Fools, because of their transgression, And because of their iniquities, were afflicted. {18} Their soul abhorred all manner of food, And they drew near to the gates of death.

The Fool is trapped in a vicious cycle of self-punishment, which can easily lead to death. But if they embrace God's love before it is too late, they can be healed:

{19} Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, [And] He saved them out of their distresses. {20} He sent His word and healed them, And delivered [them] from their destructions.

{21} Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! {22} Let them sacrifice the sacrifices of thanksgiving, And declare His works with rejoicing.

Each of these personalities needs the three theological virtues, faith, hope, and love, to embrace God's wisdom, through the power of the cross of Christ, as illustrated in the following diagram:

We will study each of the three theological virtues in more detail over the next three lessons.

Lest we think tribulation is always focused on specific character flaws, the Psalmist reminds us that some trials are common to all people:

{23} Those who go down to the sea in ships, Who do business on great waters, {24} They see the works of the LORD, And His wonders in the deep. {25} For He commands and

raises the stormy wind, Which lifts up the waves of the sea. {26} They mount up to the heavens, They go down again to the depths; Their soul melts because of trouble. {27} They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, And are at their wits' end.

Even here, the solution is the same:

{28} Then they cry out to the LORD in their trouble, And He brings them out of their distresses. {29} He calms the storm, So that its waves are still. {30} Then they are glad because they are quiet; So He guides them to their desired haven.

{31} Oh, that [men] would give thanks to the LORD [for] His goodness, And [for] His wonderful works to the children of men! {32} Let them exalt Him also in the assembly of the people, And praise Him in the company of the elders.

The Psalmist urges us to acknowledge God's greatness (His sovereign power):

{33} He turns rivers into a wilderness, And the watersprings into dry ground; {34} A fruitful land into barrenness, For the wickedness of those who dwell in it. {35} He turns a wilderness into pools of water, And dry land into watersprings.

We should also acknowledge His goodness in His unending mercy:

{36} There He makes the hungry dwell, That they may establish a city for a dwelling place, {37} And sow fields and plant vineyards, That they may yield a fruitful harvest. {38} He also blesses them, and they multiply greatly; And He does not let their cattle decrease.

God is at work through all human afflictions to remind us that we are but dust:

{39} When they are diminished and brought low Through oppression, affliction and sorrow, {40} He pours contempt on princes, And causes them to wander in the wilderness [where there is] no way...

His work in our trials brings glory to His name—and joy to our souls—by showing the riches of His wisdom and mercy:

{41} Yet He sets the poor on high, far from affliction, And makes [their] families like a flock. {42} The righteous see [it] and rejoice, And all iniquity stops its mouth. {3} Whoever [is] wise will observe these [things], And they will understand the lovingkindness of the LORD.

Do we have the eyes to see what God is doing and the heart to submit to it?

Decision

Repentance: Of which aspect of your self are you most proud? Ask God to break that idol.

Action: How can your nurture faith, hope, and love in your life and in the lives of those you lead and serve?

Worship: Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good. His mercy endures forever.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Hebrews 11**. How does faith produce works? At what cost?

Memory Verse: Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. — Hebrews 11:1

B.2 From Simplicity to Faith

In Which Unseen Faith Transforms the Visible World

Memory Verse: Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. — Hebrews 11:1

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 5A. The Three Theological Virtues (Faith)

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 4. The Simple

Introduction

Faith is the primary virtue of the mind. It enables us to base decisions on reasons, as well as to deduce reasons from decisions (axioms). Faith can be defined as **the ability to believe what is true—even when difficult**.

Faith is particularly needed by the Simple, who would otherwise only trust what they can touch and feel. Yet God's invisible wisdom is in reality more powerful than all the armies of flesh and blood which rail against it. Thus, choosing to pursue God's wisdom in faith is actually the simplest decision of all...

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 8**. Why do the Simple need wisdom?

Bible

Hebrews 11

This famous chapter begins with a simple yet profound definition of faith:

{11:1} Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Faith is how we appropriate truths we cannot see. It does not take much faith to believe that the sky is blue or that a chair has four legs, since those facts are readily apparent. On the other hand, it requires faith in science to believe that the sky is blue due to the way invisible particles called “atoms” reflect light from the sun. For that matter, trusting that a particular chair is strong enough to support your weight is an act of faith—especially after a Thanksgiving dinner!

Importantly, faith is not a mere intellectual belief; it is the basis for making wise decisions:

{2} For by it the elders obtained a good testimony.

Since the most important things in the universe are not immediately obvious, they require faith:

{3} By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.

Verse 3 can be read as describing both scientific or spiritual truth, since they:

flow from God's character (name)
are generally not visible to our naked senses
together uphold the world we live in

The secular spirit of the Enlightenment tried to divorce faith from reason by presenting them as independent and opposing forces. In reality, when used wisely, faith and reason depend on each other, and we need both (along with humility) to fully explore and understand God's plan:

{4} By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.

The word witness in verse 4 is the same as testimony in verse 2 and is actually the root of our word martyr. However, witness could also be translated as "evidence": our faith is not based merely on tradition or authority but on the evidence of those who have gone before us and triumphed over death:

{5} By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, "and was not found, because God had taken him"; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.

In particular, our spiritual ancestors provide evidence of what kind of faith is necessary to please God (i.e., live aligned with His holiness):

{6} But without faith [it is] impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and [that] He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

This verse expresses a general principle: to apprehend any truth requires believing that it exists and that it is worth seeking. If you do not believe in happiness, true love, or a good cup of coffee, you will never make the effort to find them. Somewhat paradoxically, it is for that reason we must have faith that God exists before He can reveal Himself to us.

However, faith does not grope blindly in the dark. Rather, we can follow the well-lit trail of those who preceded us in faith:

{7} By faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark for the saving of his household, by which he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith.

Though love ultimately ends by casting out fear (cf. I John 4:18), faith begins with holy fear, which is the same fear that is the beginning of wisdom and is the awareness that God punishes those who scorn Him as surely as He rewards those who seek Him.

{8} By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. {9} By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as [in] a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and

Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; {10} for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker [is] God.

Faith is particularly important to us as foreigners, for God wants us to help bring His seed into the world:

{11} By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.

{12} Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born [as many] as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

By faith, we can be assured there exists a place we have never been nor seen, which is nonetheless our true home:

{13} These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced [them] and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. {14} For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. {15} And truly if they had called to mind that [country] from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.

The Simple desire to preserve the comfortable world they know or at least imagine they remember. Conversely, those who are wise faithfully seek a place they do not know, which God has prepared for them:

{16} But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly [country]. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

Getting to this “heavenly country” requires letting go of what is most precious to us in this life:

{17} By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten [son], {18} of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” {19} concluding that God [was] able to raise [him] up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

As our forefathers did, we should pass our faith down to others:

{20} By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

{21} By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, [leaning] on the top of his staff.

{22} By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the departure of the children of Israel, and gave instructions concerning his bones.

The concept of faith blessing others is seen most dramatically in the life of Moses, who was born in faith:

{23} By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden three months by his parents, because they saw [he] [was] a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s command.

Moses later chose to appropriate that faith for Himself at great cost:

{24} By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, {25} choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, {26} esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward. {27} By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured as seeing Him who is invisible.

Moses' faith in turn led to deliverance and victory for the Israelites:

{28} By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, lest he who destroyed the firstborn should touch them.

{29} By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry [land], [whereas] the Egyptians, attempting [to do] so, were drowned.

{30} By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they were encircled for seven days.

Acting out in faith even blesses the Gentiles (like us):

{31} By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

Those examples are just a few of the people who turned their world upside-down (or rather, right-side up) through faith:

{32} And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also [of] David and Samuel and the prophets: {33} who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, {34} quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. {35a} Women received their dead raised to life again.

Not every story of faith ends happily:

{35b} Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. {36} Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. {37} They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented— {38} of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, [in] dens and caves of the earth.

It is a wonderful thing to have a conquering faith that brings victory in this life, but it is even more glorious to have an enduring faith that continues even beyond death:

{39} And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, {40} God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.

The sobering truth is that the blessings we enjoy today are built upon the faith of countless souls who suffered and died without seeing the fruits of their labors.

What legacy of faith will we leave to those who come after us?

Decision

Repentance: What might be the “Isaac” God is calling you to sacrifice in order to receive a deeper faith?

Action: Where can you seek God more diligently, in faith that He will reward you?

Worship: Thank God for the “heavenly country” He has prepared for you.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Romans 5**. Why does hope not disappoint, even amidst suffering?

Memory Verse: And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. — Romans 5:3–4

B.3 From Mockery to Hope

In Which Our Souls Find Hope amidst Suffering

Memory Verse: And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. — Romans 5:3–4

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 5B. The Three Theological Virtues (Hope)

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 5. The Mockers

Introduction

Hope is the primary virtue of the soul. It provides reasons to encourage positive emotions and the emotional energy to search for better reasons. It can be defined as **the ability to joyfully pursue a higher purpose — even when painful.**

Hope is particularly needed by the Mockers, who is driven by both the need to control (due to fear) and the illusion of control (due to pride). Yet if they can unclench their soul enough to hope in God's wisdom, Mockers will discover that true freedom comes from giving up control.

Such learning usually only comes after great suffering...

Devotion

Read **Isaiah 28**. Why should Mockers build their lives on God's wisdom instead of their own?

Bible

Romans 5

The story of hope begins with faith in God, which produces peace:

{5:1} Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...

Perhaps surprisingly, Mockers rarely have peace. They may seem complacent—even smug—but that is a fragile façade. They only feel comfortable while they imagine they are in control.

Contrast the Mockers with the wise, who have true peace. By faith, the wise hope in the One who is truly in control and looking out for their best interests. Thus, they stand not in their own strength, but by the grace of God:

{2} through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

Because they stand by the grace of God, the wise do not seek their own comfort or convenience; they seek the glory of God. In fact, *kauchaomai* (translated “rejoice” in verse 2) is a synonym for the word glory. Both words convey exulting in something wondrous.

Unlike Mockers who trust in their own glory, the wise realize that their peace and joy are found in God’s glory, so they can rejoice even in the midst of suffering:

{3} And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance...

Why do they rejoice in tribulations? They want to see God’s glory revealed in their own character:

{4} and perseverance, character; and character, hope.

Hope means believing that God will do the best thing we can imagine, or something even better. We usually hope for a world (or at least a life) free from pain and suffering, which means we are usually disappointed.

To avoid disappointment, we need to instead fix our hope on the glory of God:

{5} Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Unlike faith, which resides primarily in the mind, hope is a virtue of the soul. It is not something we can create by an act of the will; hope is in large part an emotional response to experiencing the love of God.

It is only as we abide in the Spirit, remembering how hopeless we were without God, that we realize how much reason we have for hope because of Christ’s sacrifice:

{6} For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. {7} For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. {8} But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Christ’s death fundamentally changes our relationship with the Creator of the universe, transforming us from enemies to sons:

{9} Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. {10} For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

Being transformed is just the beginning:

{11} And not only [that], but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

We are not just rejoicing in the gifts of salvation but in the Giver of salvation Himself:

{12} Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned...

We are after far more than mere freedom from sin and death:

{13} (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

{14} Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

We are after a gift beyond price:

{15} But the free gift [is] not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.

{16} And the gift [is] not like [that which came] through the one who sinned. For the judgment [which came] from one [offense resulted] in condemnation, but the free gift [which came] from many offenses [resulted] in justification.

{17} For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.)

We are born into a world of sin through the fall of our ancestor Adam, which is why we can never fully escape from suffering in this life. Yet thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ there is still hope:

{18} Therefore, as through one man's offense [judgment] came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act [the free gift came] to all men, resulting in justification of life.

{19} For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.

Christ's redemptive work does not immediately wipe away all the consequences of Adam's sin. Instead, it transforms that sin into an opportunity to create holiness, reveal God's grace, and thus bring Him glory:

{20} Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more...

Grace's triumph over sin is merely a down payment on the ultimate hope of a future life, when righteousness will reign forevermore:

{21} so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

To appropriate that hope, all we must do is cease trying to reign over our own lives and surrender ourselves as slaves to God's glory.

Decision

Repentance: Where in your life do you feel you must be in control? Ask God to take control of that area.

Action: What can you do to help bring grace to an area where sin is abounding?

Worship: Ask God to pour out His love into your heart via the Holy Spirit.

For Next Week

For next week, read **John 13**. To whom does Jesus show love? How?

Memory Verse: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. — John 13:34

B.4 From Folly to Love

In Which We Are Rescued from Our Folly by God's Love

Memory Verse: A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. — John 13:34

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 5C. The Three Theological Virtues (Love)

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 6. The Fool

Introduction

Love is the primary virtue of the heart. It is both a decision that gives rise to emotions as well an emotion that gives rise to decisions, and love needs both to thrive. Love can be defined as **the ability to pursue another's glory — even at the cost of your own.**

The Fool particularly needs love, as the Fool's emotional damage drives a cycle of self-punishment disguised as the pursuit of pleasure. If you have been playing the part of the Fool, there is only way out of your self-destructive cycle. You must purify your heart by receiving God's love and forgiveness to the point where you love Him more than you love the false gods you have served. It is only then you can discover what it means to genuinely love yourself.

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 26**. Why is folly so dishonorable? How should we respond to it?

Bible

John 13

We begin our study in the upper room, the night before Jesus is crucified:

{13:1} Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

It is difficult for us to imagine how much the disciples loved Jesus after spending three years in his presence, hearing His teachings, and seeing His miracles; yet it is much harder to imagine how much Jesus loved them!

It is especially difficult to understand how Jesus loved his disciples considering that not all them were what we would consider worthy of receiving Christ's love, as He well knew (cf. **John 6:70**):

{2} And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's [son], to betray Him...

We do not know exactly how, when, or why Judas started to doubt Jesus. We do know that Judas had issues with stealing (cf. **John 12:6**), which suggests he was already in the grip of some addiction—either to money or to something bought with money — which is the hallmark of a Fool.

Jesus is not focused on the disciples as much as He is on His Father:

{3} Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God...

This is the first and most essential truth about Christian love (agape): it is rooted in the character (holiness) of God our Father, not in any manifest worthiness of the beloved. Only as we trust in God's goodness and love are we free to lay aside our own glory in order to serve others:

{4} rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.

The following verse stands as the literal enactment of what Paul describes in **Philippians 2:7** as "taking on the form of a servant":

{5} After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe [them] with the towel with which He was girded.

The second essential truth about Christian love is that it is not about dramatic acts that build up our own ego (cf. **1 Corinthians 13:1–3**), but it is doing whatever it takes to meet the needs of the beloved.

The third truth is that Christian love is not simply doing what people want:

{6} Then He came to Simon Peter. And [Peter] said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?"

Though Peter says it out loud, surely all the disciples share his reaction, as foot-washing was a menial duty typically performed by the humblest of servants.

Jesus is not at all surprised by their consternation:

{7} Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."

Peter, impatient as always, cannot imagine Jesus' act of humility ever making sense:

{8} Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Jesus gives Peter a shocking answer—so much so that Peter goes to the other extreme:

{9} Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also [my] hands and [my] head!"

It is surely a sign of the perfect patience of Jesus that He does not give up on Peter at this point; He instead offers a simple reply:

{10} Jesus said to him, “He who is bathed needs only to wash [his] feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you.” {11} For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, “You are not all clean.”

This is a crucial lesson for the Fool. For what we might call ordinary sins, it is enough to simply repent and ask for forgiveness as part of our daily walk with God. But true folly (i.e., addiction) does not respond to such measures; curing deep folly requires a top-to-bottom transformation of the heart.

Either way, it is only when we allow Jesus to cleanse us that we are able to follow in His footsteps and understand what it truly means to be great in the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matthew 18:1–4):

{12} So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, “Do you know what I have done to you?

{13} You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for [so] I am. {14} If I then, [your] Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. {15} For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.

This is a beautiful picture of holiness: an inner peace with God so pure it is indifferent to external signs of glory.

{16} Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.

{17} If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.

Alas, it is possible to know the truth but not do it, as Judas and fools in general know all too well:

{18} “I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.’

{19} Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am [He].

{20} Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.”

{21} When Jesus had said these things, He was troubled in spirit, and testified and said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, one of you will betray Me.”

The disciples are filled with curiosity at Jesus’ stunning accusation:

{22} Then the disciples looked at one another, perplexed about whom He spoke.

{23} Now there was leaning on Jesus’ bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.

{24} Simon Peter therefore motioned to him to ask who it was of whom He spoke.

{25} Then, leaning back on Jesus’ breast, he said to Him, “Lord, who is it?”

They do not understand even when Jesus shows them the answer:

{26} Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I shall give a piece of bread when I have dipped [it].” And having dipped the bread, He gave [it] to Judas Iscariot, [the son] of Simon.

{27} Now after the piece of bread, Satan entered him. Then Jesus said to him, “What you do, do quickly.”

{28} But no one at the table knew for what reason He said this to him.

Like many Fools, Judas had covered his folly with a veneer of responsibility:

{29} For some thought, because Judas had the money box, that Jesus had said to him, “Buy [those things] we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor.

{30} Having received the piece of bread, he then went out immediately. And it was night.

Some have questioned why or even if Judas was guilty of sin, since Jesus appears to commission (or at least condone) his act of betrayal.

The painful truth is that some sins, at least for some people in some circumstances, are inevitable. Rather than trying to forcibly prevent them from sinning, it may be wiser to preserve the relationship and explicitly allow them to experience the full wretchedness of their folly, that they may voluntarily turn and repent (cf. the prodigal son, in **Luke 15:11–32**).

In other words, sometimes the greatest act of love is simply letting go.

In this view, the reason Judas stands condemned is not the fact that he betrays Jesus (since arguably all the disciples do, to a greater or lesser extent). Rather, Judas stands condemned because he does not come back to Jesus for forgiveness (cf. **Matthew 27:3–10**).

There is no sin incapable of being forgiven, if we are willing to humble ourselves and repent. Wherever sin abounds, God’s glory is waiting to be revealed (cf. **Romans 5:20–21**):

{31} So, when he had gone out, Jesus said, “Now the Son of Man is glorified, and God is glorified in Him. {32} If God is glorified in Him, God will also glorify Him in Himself, and glorify Him immediately.

In particular, Jesus uses this final opportunity to share with us the fullness of His glory, His greatest attribute — love:

{33} Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, ‘Where I am going, you cannot come,’ so now I say to you.

{34} A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. {35} By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

The love Christians manifest for each other has long been the most compelling argument for believing Christianity. Conversely, our failure to consistently love each other has been the strongest argument against the truth of Christianity.

The four and final truth about Christian love in this passage is this: we can never truly love each other—much less the world—in our own strength. If we are foolish enough to trust in our own virtue, we will end up sorely disappointed:

{36} Simon Peter said to Him, “Lord, where are You going?” Jesus answered him, “Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterward.”

{37} Peter said to Him, “Lord, why can I not follow You now? I will lay down my life for Your sake.”

{38} Jesus answered him, “Will you lay down your life for My sake? Most assuredly, I say to you, the rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times.

Verse 38 brings us face-to-face with pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins, which we will study next. May God grant us sufficient love both from Him and for Him to save us from the folly of pride.

Decision

Repentance: Where are you addicted to something other than God's love? What might it take for God to transform your heart?

Action: Whom can you serve the way Christ served His disciples?

Worship: How much love did Jesus have for Peter? For Judas? For you?

For Next Week

For next week, read **1 Peter 5**. Why is humility essential to the Christian life?

Bonus reading: review the Beatitudes (**Matthew 5:1–12**), which will be our template for combating the Seven Deadly Sins.

Memory Verse: Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:3

B.5 From Pride to Humility

In Which We Humble Ourselves before God and Our Elders, Who Exalt Us

Memory Verse: Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:3

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter	6. The Beatitudes Confront the Seven Deadly Sins
Chapter	7. Poor in Spirit vs. Proud at Heart

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter	8. Pride, Humility, and the Fear of the Lord
Chapter	3.2 (Truth) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

This week, we will shift our study of wisdom from **the theological virtues** (faith, hope, and love) to what may be called **the blessed virtues** from the Beatitudes. We will follow Peter Kreeft in contrasting them with the seven deadly sins, beginning with humility versus pride.

Pride is the first and deadliest of the deadly sins. It can be defined as **trusting our own name rather than God's**. Pride is relying on our own character and identity as the ultimate authority.

In contrast, humility is recognizing the painful fact of our own poverty of spirit, so that we empty ourselves in order to receive God's holiness.

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 16**. Why is pride so dangerous?

Bible

1 Peter 5

Chapter 5 begins with Peter not lording it over his readers as an apostle but simply exhorting his readers as a “fellow elder”:

{5:1} The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

Suffering is a prominent theme in 1 Peter, where it is seen as the path to glory (cf. **1 Peter 4:13**), as is being a shepherd:

{2} Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly...

The crucial point Peter makes in these first two verses is that elders should intrinsically want to serve. That is, they should not serve out of a sense of obligation or a desire for external rewards, since the former leads to burnout, and the latter leads to corruption.

{3} nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock...

Peter clearly internalizes the lesson Jesus tried to teach him in **John 13** about how leaders must model the values they want to pass on to their followers. We do not own those under our care to mold them into our image; they are “entrusted” to us, that we might reveal Jesus to them even as He is revealed to us:

{4} and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.

The key to achieving humility as leaders lies in not seeking glory from those who follow us, but instead seeking glory for the One we follow.

If we sow humility by our example, we will reap humility as fruit among our followers:

{5} Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to [your] elders. Yes, all of [you] be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for “God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble.”

We will return to 1 Peter in a few weeks to study submission in more detail. For now, our focus is on humbling ourselves before God, so that instead of needing to resist us, He is free to exalt us by His grace:

{6} Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time...

The word exalt means **to raise to dignity, honor and happiness**. When we try to exalt ourselves by pursuing dignity, honor, and happiness through the riches of our own spirit, we are at cross-purposes to the order of the universe, and we encounter resistance everywhere we go. On the other hand, if we embrace our poverty of spirit and our utter inability and unworthiness to achieve dignity, honor, and happiness on our own, we receive our full birthright as citizens of heaven:

{7} casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.

The life of pride is a life of constant worry because we must protect and feed our ego while we use up our own strength to save ourselves. Pride is doubly dangerous for the Christian, since we must contend against not just the world, but the devil:

{8} Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Pride is Satan’s native food, and there is nothing more appetizing to him than a Christian who scorns humility. Our only sure protection is to not trust in ourselves but to have faith in the God who cares for us:

{9} Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

Peter does not hide the painful truth. To humble ourselves before God and resist Satan means we will travel the path of suffering rather than enjoy the fleeting ego-gratification of the world.

Although we will suffer, we will not travel alone, nor will we suffer in vain:

{10} But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle [you].

To be humble ultimately means to not look to ourselves—our cares, circumstances, or character—but to God and the holiness He desires to create in us. Everything our spirits desire can only be found in the Kingdom of Heaven, which is the Lordship of Christ:

{11} To Him [be] the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Are you willing to let go of your own glory to receive His?

Decision

Repentance: Where have you trusted in your own “name”? Empty yourself before God.

Action: What “cares” can you cast upon Jesus this week?

Worship: Meditate on the crown of glory we will receive, and reflect on how superior it is to mere human glory.

For Next Week

For next week, read **1 Timothy 6**. How should we think about money?

Memory Verse: Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. — Matthew 5:7

B.6 From Greed to Generosity

In Which We Gain Power over Money by Giving It Away

Memory Verse: Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. — Matthew 5:7

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 8. Giving Mercy vs. Getting Things (Avarice)

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.3 (Righteous) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

Even if we escape the pride of trusting completely in our own “name,” we must still guard ourselves against trusting in anything instead of God. The purest form of self-trust is **greed** or **avarice**, which can be defined as **treating money as an end** (i.e., an extension of the self). The opposite of greed is generosity, which considers money primarily a means of showing mercy to others.

Devotion

Read **Malachi 3**. How does God feel about those who abuse money versus those who steward it wisely?

Bible

1 Timothy 6

Ironically, Paul begins our study of money by offering advice to people who do not have any:

{6:1} Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.

Pause, and let verse 1 sink in. Selah.

Most of us do not consider ourselves greedy, yet we would be furious and resentful if someone expected us to work without pay, which we would see as being a slave.

Paul is clearly preaching the higher standard of committing ourselves to service out of respect for the “name” of God. This higher standard is a good definition of mercy: showing honor to others because of God’s holiness, not theirs (or ours).

In other words, we should not treat others as we think they deserve to be treated or as they have treated us. Rather, we should treat them the way a holy God has treated us. In fact, the way we honor others reveals a great deal about how we perceive God!

If our minds are fixed on honoring God's name, we do not waste time worrying about how others behave—even those we think owe us something:

{2a} And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved.

This command strikes at the heart of our modern idolatry of money as a tool for self-fulfillment. Biblically, our first priority is to always do good to God and others. Being rewarded for good behavior is a legitimate desire (cf. **1 Timothy 5:18**) but is explicitly of secondary importance.

The original preachers of capitalism (i.e., Adam Smith and Max Weber) understood that money was intended to be a side effect of the pursuit of mercy and generosity, just as happiness is a side effect of the purpose-driven life. Unfortunately, modern economic thinkers have inverted that order, treating the pursuit of money as the primary goal, with the cultivation of virtue as (at best) an incidental benefit.

Sadly, the church has not always done much better. We have too often either been uncritical cheerleaders of one or another of the world's systems, or else we have simply ignored economic activity as if it were unworthy of God's notice.

Paul, on the other hand, saw it as the business of the church to teach people the true motivation for work: godliness:

{2b} Teach and exhort these things. {3} If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, [even] the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness...

Otherwise, we end up being taught by Mockers:

{4} he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, {5} useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a [means of] gain. From such withdraw yourself.

Verse 5 is often interpreted in a purely religious context, yet it accurately describes the Western attitude of viewing virtue simply as an efficient way to make money or to fulfill personal goals.

Paul considers such teaching worse than useless, for it is the perversion of a profound truth:

{6} Now godliness with contentment is great gain.

True gain is putting on the holiness of God. Holiness is the only sure route to the peace, security, and fulfillment we falsely seek through money.

{7} For we brought nothing into [this] world, [and] [it is] certain we can carry nothing out.
{8} And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.

To idolize wealth is to open oneself up to great folly:

{9} But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and [into] many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition.

Greed is considered one of the deadly sins not so much for its direct impact on the soul but for the way it inspires all sorts of other evil:

{10} For the love of money is a root of all [kinds of] evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

To be clear, this verse is often misquoted as claiming that “money is the root of all evil,” which is neither true nor biblical. Money itself is not evil, but it is dangerous, just like fire, sex, and religion are inherently dangerous.

The solution is not so much to avoid money altogether but to set our hearts on holiness in order to relegate money to its proper place:

{11} But you, O man of God, flee these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, gentleness.

In particular, we are called to live our life for eternity instead of the passing pleasures of this world:

{12} Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have confessed the good confession in the presence of many witnesses.

Here Paul alludes to the importance of public confession and the support of a worshipping community. Accountability is particularly essential when it comes to handling money, given its power to tempt.

It is not only people who are watching:

{13} I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and [before] Christ Jesus who witnessed the good confession before Pontius Pilate, {14} that you keep [this] commandment without spot, blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ's appearing,

More importantly, He is the One we need to be watching for:

{15} which He will manifest in His own time, [He who is] the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords, {16} who alone has immortality, dwelling in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see, to whom [be] honor and everlasting power. Amen.

Lest we think this is merely a theological principle, Paul gets immensely practical:

{17a} Command those who are rich in this present age...

This word is for all of us, who (if we are able to read this verse) are already far richer than most of the world, even if we do not feel like we are:

{17a} ...not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.

The first rule for defanging greed is to trust God instead of money:

{18} [Let them] do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share,

The second rule for conquering greed is to be generous (i.e., merciful). Giving away money desecrates the altar of materialism, thus freeing us from its curse:

{19} storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

The third and final rule for overcoming greed is to devote ourselves to storing up treasures in heaven, instead of on earth (cf. **Matthew 6:20**).

Do this, and you will live (cf. **Luke 10:28**):

{20} O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane [and] idle babblings and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge— {21} by professing it some have strayed concerning the faith. Grace [be] with you. Amen.

Breaking the power of greed is essential to maintaining the integrity of our walk with Christ, as far too many pastors have learned the hard way. It is only by letting go of our need to acquire by surrendering ourselves to God's grace that we have any hope of staying on the right path.

We can only receive the mercy we so desperately need by showing mercy to others.

Decision

Repentance: How much of your time and energy is spent worldly gain as opposed to godliness?

Action: To whom can you be generous this week? At what cost?

Worship: Reread verses 15 and 16. How ought we to worship a God we cannot approach directly?

For Next Week

For next week, read **1 Peter 2–3**. Why and to whom does Peter insist we submit?

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. — Matthew 5:4

B.7 From Envy to Submission

In Which We Submit to Our Place in God's Creation and Are Commended by Him

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted. — Matthew 5:4

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 9. Blessed Mourner vs. Mourner at Others' Blessedness (Envy)

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.6 (Modest) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

Envy is a close cousin to greed, though greed focuses on the thing desired while envy focuses on the person who currently has it. Envy has been called the most miserable sin, since it does not allow even temporary pleasure to those who commit it.

Envy can be defined as **resenting those who possess what we crave** (not to be confused with jealousy, which is resenting those who crave what we possess).

In contrast to those who envy, mourners have processed the painful truth that this life will never fulfill our deepest longings. But as we submit to our place in God's created order, we receive what the wise crave most: the comfort of His holy presence.

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 14**. How does envy relate to folly?

Bible

1 Peter 2–3

Peter begins this section by listing envy as one of several ugly sins we should avoid:

{2:1} Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking,

Interestingly, all of these sins tend to be committed out of envy, which is partly why envy is considered a deadly sin: it inspires us to treat our neighbors badly. Even if the resulting sins are petty, they must be laid aside before we can appropriate what God has for us:

{2} as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, {3} if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.

The surest antidote to envy is tasting the Lord's goodness to us. Once we understand how our deepest desires "have been granted in what he ordaineth⁵," we no longer need to envy those who seem richer in the things of this world.

Our model for escaping greed and envy is Jesus, who was stripped of all earthly possessions (cf. **Matthew 27:35**) yet inherits all the treasures of heaven:

{4} Coming to Him [as to] a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God [and] precious, {5} you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. {6} Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, "Behold, I lay in Zion A chief cornerstone, elect, precious, And he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame."

This passage is key to understanding both the cause and cure of envy. Underlying envy (and many other sins, as we will discuss later) is **shame**, the feeling of being dishonored or dishonorable. Shame has been an integral part of the human condition since Adam's transgression, and we now have more creative tools than fig leaves for covering it up!

Envy typically arises when we see someone else blessed or honored with something we feel we deserve or need. Typically we believe possessing that thing will increase our status and security within society (i.e., take away or hide the shame of rejection and inadequacy).

God is calling us to die to our fear of man and instead find our identity in His holiness. In contrast to our self-destructive attempts to ingratiate ourselves into the world, accepting our place as "living stones" in God's temple is the only safe way to avoid shame.

Following in the path of Jesus means accepting (and mourning) our rejection by the world:

{7} Therefore, to you who believe, [He is] precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief cornerstone," {8} and "A stone of stumbling And a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.

Worldly rejection is a small price to pay to be chosen by God:

{9a} But you [are] a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people...

The glory of our being chosen should not go to our head; it should go to our Head!

{9a} that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; {10} who once [were] not a people but [are] now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

It is only when we accept our identity as God's chosen people and receive His mercy that we are able to fight for our souls:

{11} Beloved, I beg [you] as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul...

We fight not only for ourselves but for God's glory among the nations:

⁵ From "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" by Joachim Neander and Catherine Winkworth

{12} having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by [your] good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.

Ultimately, the only life that makes sense is the one devoted to seeking God's glory. If we want to understand God's perspective on submission, we cannot covet glory from the world or for ourselves:

{13a} Therefore submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake...

This is a hard saying, especially for those of us who grew up in Western democracies believing the sayings that God made us to be free and that government requires the consent of the governed. The crucial point is that we ultimately need to obey secular laws for His sake, not our own.

Why does He want us to obey the laws of the land?

{13b} whether to the king as supreme,{14} or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and [for the] praise of those who do good.

The radical truth implied in verse 13b is that all human authority is established as a reflection (however imperfect) of God's supreme authority, rewarding virtue and punishing evil. To be sure, actual rulers do not always live up to that high calling. Often they do the reverse, as Peter himself knew well (cf. **Acts 5:17–42**).

However, the reality of corrupt leaders does not change the essential legitimacy of human government and God's command to honor it:

{15} For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men—{16} as free, yet not using liberty as a cloak for vice, but as bondservants of God.

In our flesh, it is easy to find excuses to ignore human laws we consider unjust or inappropriate. After all, are we not free in Christ? Yet that is no excuse for engaging in sin or acting in rebellion. Instead, we should do the following:

{17} Honor all [people]. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king.

Note how Peter, when he feels God call him to disobey the religious rulers of his day, does not only tells them to their face what he intends; he willingly—even joyfully—submits to their prescribed punishment (cf. **Acts 5:41**). In doing so, he shows respect for their position of authority even as he disagrees with the persons in charge.

His willingness to submit gives Peter the moral authority to command slaves to suffer (and mourn) the same way he did:

{18} Servants, [be] submissive to [your] masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. {19} For this [is] commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully.

Peter believes God is worth it and will honor them for it:

{20} For what credit [is it] if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this [is] commendable before God.

After all, this is how Christ lived—and died:

{21} For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: {22} “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; {23} who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed [Himself] to Him who judges righteously; {24} who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed.

Lest we forget, His unjust suffering was on our behalf:

{25} For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Is it then too much for Him to ask us to bear unjust suffering for His sake?

Once we accept that we must submit to imperfect human authority out of respect for God’s divine authority—and mourn the unjust suffering that often accompanies such submission—we can better understand how this dynamic works in marriage:

{3:1} Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, {2} when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. {3} Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— {4} rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. {5} For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, {6} as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror.

Wifely submission is here recommended for the same reason as other kinds of submission: to win the hearts of unbelievers, to earn God’s commendation, and to demonstrate the fear of God over the fear of man.

{7} Husbands, likewise, dwell with [them] with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as [being] heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered.

Significantly, husbands are not told to demand or ask for submission. Rather, they are told to honor their wives as joint heirs, out of fear of the Lord. Even though God has ordained the roles of king and subject, master and servant, husband and wife, in His eyes we are all equal as persons. As such, we must do good to one another:

{8} Finally, all [of you be] of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, [be] tenderhearted, [be] courteous; {9} not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing. {10} For “He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit. {11} Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it. {12} For the eyes of the LORD [are] on the righteous, And His ears [are open] to their prayers; But the face of the LORD [is] against those who do evil.”

What harm is there in doing good?

{13} And who [is] he who will harm you if you become followers of what is good?

Actually there are those who will harm us for pursuing what is right, but even that injustice ultimately leads to good:

{14} But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, [you are] blessed. "And do not be afraid of their threats, nor be troubled."

Peter is not saying that we should be brazen and court danger; he urges us to be prepared for suffering, in all humility and fear of the Lord:

{15} But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always [be] ready to [give] a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear...

If we are pure and prepared to be punished, then when it comes we can know that it is unjust:

{16} having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed. {17} For [it is] better, if it is the will of God, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

When we suffer, we mourn over the pain, making us eligible to receive God's comfort, which is a greater reward than any worldly pleasure.

Decision

Repentance: Whom do you resent or envy that you need to release?

Action: What current suffering do you need to fully mourn before God?

Worship: Rest in the Lord's comfort.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Matthew 18**. Why must we forgive?

Memory Verse: Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. — Matthew 5:5,9

B.8 From Anger to Reconciliation

In Which We Forgive Those Who Don't Deserve It Because We Don't Either

Memory Verse: Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth... Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. — Matthew 5:5,9

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 10. The Meek and the Peacemakers vs. The Anger-driven

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.4 (Gentle and healing) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

Anger is unique among the seven deadly sins in that, in general, anger is not a sin (cf. **Ephesians 4:26**). At one level, it is simply an emotional reaction to having our boundaries crossed. At the highest level, anger is actually a virtue, since it is a significant part of God's character (i.e., the holy name to which we are being conformed).

At the same time, anger is the name of one of the most violent and dangerous sins. We can define sinful anger as **self-righteous passion for punishing those who offend us**. Anger is so empowering and so deadly because it magnifies the sins of others to the point where we ignore our own.

Because anger can be devastating, we need to combat it with both **meekness** (restraining our passions in submission to God's rule) and **peacemaking** (seeking restoration and reconciliation instead of revenge).

Of course, that is easier said than done...

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 15**. Why is anger so dangerous?

Bible

Matthew 18

Conveniently, Matthew kicks off our study of forgiveness by discussing children:

{18:1} At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" {2} Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of

them, {3} and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. {4} Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Though children are easily angered, they are just as quick to forgive and rarely hold a grudge. Even when an adult must command a child to apologize, this child is somehow able to put the offense behind them right away. Perhaps the reason children are able to forgive and forget so easily is because their anger is more emotional (based on hurt) than spiritual (based on pride). As such their anger, though occasionally violent, is not as sinful.

Tragically though, it is possible to wound a child so deeply it causes them to sin:

{5} Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. {6} “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.

The phrase cause to sin is elsewhere translated as “offend.” To be sure, the world is full of offenses that tempt us to respond in sinful ways, but that does not give us an excuse to sin:

{7} Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

In fact, Jesus uses some pretty extreme metaphors to demonstrate the importance of avoiding sin, regardless of the apparent cause or “offense”:

{8} “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast [it] from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. {9} And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast [it] from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.

Jesus especially demonstrates the importance of avoiding sin in the context of our influence over the young:

{10} “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.

The messages of children (from angelos, messenger) apparently go directly to God. His heart is tender not only towards children but to all who are vulnerable and helpless:

{11} For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. {12} “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? {13} And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that [sheep] than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. {14} Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Shockingly, however, He expects us to have the same heart towards those who hurt us:

{15} “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

This is where we tend to stumble. It is easy to be gentle and forgiving (at least in theory) towards those we perceive as weak or lost. Yet when someone offends us, we consider them an aggressor, and our flesh rises up to demand justice!

From God's viewpoint, your offender's sin simply demonstrates that they are another of His lost sheep in need of rescue. Our sanctified hearts should be like His, pursuing reconciliation and restoration of relationships, which is an act of peacemaking. Christ tells us to pursue reconciliation at any cost, even if it takes the involvement of other witnesses or the whole church:

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

The last part of verse 17 does not mean we are to completely shun those who sin against us; after all, we are commanded to love even the heathen and the tax collector. However, it does mean those who refuse to hear reproach are to be deemed "out of fellowship" with you. It seems God prefers this extreme action to a fellowship fractured by unreconciled relationships.

Reconciliation is critical, because when the Body of Christ is united in God's name His kingdom is released upon the earth:

{18} "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. {19} "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. {20} For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

To his credit, Peter figures out the high standard implied by all of this, though he cringes slightly:

{21} Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Forgiving someone seven times went well beyond the standard of Peter's day, but it fell way below the command of Jesus:

{22} Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

Jesus is not saying we should stop forgiving after number 490; the multiplier implies "without limits."

Perhaps sensing Peter's shock, Jesus uses a parable to make His message more understandable:

{23} Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. {24} And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents.

That is an enormous amount of money, corresponding to millions of dollars. The servant in this parable would have to be guilty of fraud or mismanagement to owe such a vast sum. Presumably Jesus wants us to compare ourselves to the servant to help us realize the magnitude of our sin against God.

Understandably, the king in the story is quite upset:

{25} But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made.

Given the severity of the punishment, the servant pleads for more time to pay him back:

{26} The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

Instead of simply granting an extension, the master takes pity on his servant and cancels his entire debt:

{27} Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

One wonders if the servant really understood the debt was completely forgiven, though, since he still tries to scrape up more money:

{28} "But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took [him] by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!'

"A hundred denarii," roughly a few thousand dollars, is nothing compared to what he had owed his master originally. Yet an ordinary servant can't easily come up with even that much money:

{29} So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'

Alas, the servant lacks the compassion of his master:

{30} And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.

The irony of the situation at hand does not go unnoticed:

{31} So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.

The master is not pleased with how his generosity has been treated:

{32} Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. {33} Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' {34} And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

When we in our anger fail to forgive others, we become the recipients of God's wrath!

To be sure, this is a parable, not an allegory, so it does not necessarily mean that God will treat us the exact same way the master in the story treats his servant. In this particular case, however, Jesus explicitly tells us He will:

{35} "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses."

Note that Jesus does not say we only need to forgive those who repent and ask for our forgiveness. The clear implication of verse 15 is that our hearts should always seek out reconciliation, not revenge, even before the other person has a chance to respond. If our offender does not repent, reconciliation may not be a viable option. Regardless, on our part and for our sake, we have to forgive.

Though the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, it is helpful to distinguish between the terms **forgiveness** and **reconciliation**. Otherwise, we may believe we cannot or need not forgive the unrepentant for fear of giving them an opportunity to sin again.

The crucial point to remember is that (as used here) forgiveness is primarily an internal transaction between ourselves and God. We give up our “right” to punish our offender so that we may fully enjoy God forgiving us. As such, we need to forgive everyone who hurts us, even if they never apologize or repent, simply to avoid hindering our relationship with God. After all, we are never able to identify or confess everything we do that hurts God, yet He forgives us anyway.

On the other hand, reconciliation is an external transaction between people. It requires active participation by both parties, and it includes the following:

Confession (agreeing about what was wrong and what is right)

Repentance (turning from the wrong to the right)

Accountability (submitting to an agreed-upon authority)

We must follow the pattern of confession, repentance, and accountability in order to restore our relationships with each other and with God.

You cannot have reconciliation without forgiveness, but you can and must forgive even when reconciliation is impossible (e.g., the other person is unwilling or absent). It only seems like an unreasonable demand if we forget how much we have been forgiven and how little we deserve it.

Decision

Repentance: With whom are you angry? Will you forgive them?

Action: How can you pursue reconciliation this week?

Worship: Meditate on God’s forgiveness towards you, and reflect on how much it cost Him.

For Next Week

For next week, read **John 15**. What must we do (or become) to bear fruit?

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. — Matthew 5:6

B.9 From Sloth to Fruitfulness

In Which We Abide Fruitfully Instead of Vegetating Slothfully

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. — Matthew 5:6

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 11. Hungering for Righteousness vs. Satisfied with Sloth

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.5 (Trustworthy) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

Sloth may seem like an archaic sin in our busy modern world, but our frenzied activity is itself a sign of sloth, which can be defined as **a lack of vigor in pursuing God's holiness**. In fact, the self-centered pursuit of our own “name”—especially under the guise of religion—is the worst kind of sloth (cf. **Matthew 23**).

The antidote to sloth lies in emptying ourselves of worldly pursuits so that we become truly hungry for faith, hope, and love. Only when we abandon slothfully seeking our own comfort, which ultimately results in restlessness, can we experience the divine life and peace that come from abiding in Him...

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 6**. What is the “fruit” of idleness?

Bible

John 15

We have been to the upper room with John before, studying the Holy Spirit in **John 16** and the folly of Judas versus the love of Christ in **John 13**. This time, we will grapple with how to move from beginning a relationship with the Son to manifesting the power of the Spirit:

{15:1} “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.

There are two profound thoughts here. First of all, Christ is the vine, the basis and source of all authentic life. Secondly, God as Father is responsible for nurturing that vine.

Since Christ Himself is already perfect, what exactly does the Father need to do?

{2} Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

Apparently, the goal of the Father is to ensure that Christ bears fruit, and He does so by keeping a close watch over the branches. Fruitless branches are cut off of the vine, but even fruitful branches are pruned. The word prune is the basis of the word catharsis, which means a painful but necessary cleansing.

Jesus has already cleansed us through His word:

{3} You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you.

Though we have been cleansed once, it merely intensifies our ongoing need to abide in Him as branches of His vine:

{4} Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me.

As His branches, bearing fruit is both our purpose and our sign of abiding:

{5} "I am the vine, you [are] the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.

Importantly, there is no middle ground. If we do not abide in the vine, we are trashed:

{6} If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw [them] into the fire, and they are burned.

If we abide in the vine, we gain authority as His heirs:

{7} If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you.

Obviously, verse 7 does not give us permission to feed the desires of our flesh. Rather, to abide in Him means to have our spirits aligned with His holy name so that we desire what He desires:

{8} By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

Importantly, our abiding in Him should not primarily be about obedience or duty, though it includes those things. Instead, we should abide in Him because of love:

{9} "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.

God's commands are not arbitrary rules designed to show us who is boss; they are an expression of His holy love:

{10} If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love.

Surrendering to His love by keeping His commands is the only sure route to joy:

{11} "These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and [that] your joy may be full.

His personal commandment is therefore the fastest route to joy, since it reflects the highest measure of love:

{12} This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. {13} Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends.

As parents and soldiers know, there is no greater joy than pouring out your life for the sake of those you love.

How precious to know that Jesus loves us that very same way. However, we must still choose to submit to His love:

{14} You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.

To be called a friend of Jesus is a high honor, and it carries a great responsibility:

{15} No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

What are the essential things He has passed on to us from the Father?

{16} You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and [that] your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

There are at least four life-changing insights in verse 16:

Jesus chose us

He appointed us to bear fruit

He wants fruit that “abides”

God will give us anything we desire, as long as it is Him

It all begins with giving love, even if it means receiving hate:

{17} These things I command you, that you love one another.

{18} “If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before [it hated] you. {19} If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

{20} Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

{21} But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me.

We must pay a heavy price to abide in His name. However, the cost of rejecting his name is even worse:

{22} If I had not come and spoken to them, they would have no sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. {23} He who hates Me hates My Father also.

{24} If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin; but now they have seen and also hated both Me and My Father. {25} But this happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, ‘They hated Me without a cause.’

Fortunately, we have the promise of a Helper:

{26} “But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.

To love the world is to live a slothful life, which may appear to be an easy life. To live for Jesus means emptying ourselves in love for our brothers and sisters, which will cause us to hunger and thirst.

The good news is that He will satiate that hunger for righteousness with the fruits of His Spirit (the true testimony of Jesus), which we can then share with others:

{27} And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning.

Do our lives testify that we were hungry, and are now filled?

Decision

Repentance: What must you give up to abide in Christ?

Action: To whom in the Body of Christ can you show the love of Jesus this week?

Worship: Why is God's love worth the hatred of the world?

For Next Week

For next week, read **James 4**. What is the "fruit" of our lust? What is the cure for our lust?

Memory Verse: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. — Matthew 5:8

B.10 From Lust to Purity

In Which Our Desires Are Tamed As Our Hearts Are Purified

Memory Verse: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. — Matthew 5:8

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 12. Pure of Heart vs. Lustful of Heart

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.7 (Wise) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

Though sometimes a synonym for sexual desire or any kind of consuming passion, we will define **lust** as **the idolatrous pursuit of sexual/romantic excitement or fulfillment**. In other words, lust is trusting eros instead of God to validate who we are (our “name”).

Though far from the deadliest sin, lust is certainly one of the most popular sins. Apart from pride, most people agree that lust is the most difficult sin to escape.

The opposite state of lustfulness is **purity**, which is defined as having a heart wholly focused on God. The pure hearted person is one who recognizes they can only find true wholeness by submitting to God’s holy name.

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 7**. How does lust make us Simple and lead to our destruction?

Bible

James 4

As usual, James gets right to the point:

{4:1} Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?

He knows that we live in a world full of senseless, destructive conflict, and he blames the state of the world on our desire for carnal pleasures:

{2} You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask.

Significantly, James does not say we should not have desires. Rather, he implies that tragedy arises when we seek to fulfill those desires in our own strength, instead of asking God.

James reminds us that He will not necessarily give us what we ask:

{3} You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

We cannot simply hand God a wish list and expect two-day shipping; we must ask in submission to God's holy name (cf. **John 16:26**), which is the opposite of feeding our flesh.

James goes so far as to equate selfish asking with **adultery**, which is seeking carnal fulfillment outside of our covenant bond before God:

{4} Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. {5} Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

God is a jealous lover. He desires to husband us into the fullness of joy by bringing our whole person into alignment with His holy nature. Willfully holding back any part of ourselves from God taints our whole relationship with Him.

God hates our faithless behavior, yet if we humble ourselves before Him, He is gracious towards our weakness:

{6} But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble."

By submitting to Him rather than to the world, we neutralize the flesh as well as the devil's influence over us:

{7} Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.

It is not enough to simply acknowledge God as Lord. We must take active steps to cultivate a relationship with Him, and we must turn away from anything that hinders our relationship with Him:

{8} Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse [your] hands, [you] sinners; and purify [your] hearts, [you] double-minded.

James agrees with the Beatitude that we must purify our hearts in order to see God. But how do we do that?

{9} Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and [your] joy to gloom.

The first step in purifying our hearts is to give up senseless pleasure and embrace the pain of our sinful condition. Many addictive behaviors, especially those that are sexual, attempt to drown out the heartache of loneliness, inadequacy, and rejection. Perversely enough, they only heighten our suffering, leading to a vicious cycle of folly.

Fasting, silence, and isolation are powerful tools for forcing ourselves to confront the cries of our soul and lift them up to God:

{10} Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up.

The second step in purification lies in admitting our inability to save ourselves. He can only give us His authentic happiness when we release our pursuit of self-gratification.

As difficult as it is to release our own agenda, there is even more required of us:

{11} Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. {12} There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?

Fallen humans we are, once we are delivered from a particular habit, we tend to become self-righteous and judgmental. Judgmentalism is perhaps the most dangerous sin of all, since condemning others opens us up to God's condemnation.

Our condemnation of others sharply contrasts with the roles of Christ and the Spirit. Neither came to condemn the world (cf. **John 3:17**), but the Spirit came to convict the world in order to produce repentance rather than shame (cf. **John 16:8**).

In fact, one possible reason so many Christian leaders have fallen into sexual immorality is because they grow complacent in their spirituality and trust in their own righteousness. Sometimes God in His severe mercy allows us to succumb to the lesser (though devastating) sin of lust to rescue us from the much deadlier (though more subtle) sin of pride.

We need to have a healthy skepticism of our own abilities and understanding:

{13} Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; {14} whereas you do not know what [will happen] tomorrow. For what [is] your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away.

We must also walk in humility before God rather than swagger in self-confidence:

{15} Instead you [ought] to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that."

{16} But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

The road to purity is one of denying our own glory and giving up our feeble attempts to control our own destiny. It means recognizing that our deepest desires are utterly tainted by sin and that following them will only lead to destruction.

The only way out is to walk in humility before God and man, showing compassion and grace to others as God shows it to us. Only then can we see a holy God clearly enough to know what will truly bring us joy.

Once we see what we ought to do, woe be to us if we do not do it:

{17} Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do [it], to him it is sin.

God often appears to be slow in judging the world for their sins, since they really do not know any better. We who do know better, however, are judged far more swiftly. Not because God is our enemy, but because He jealously loves us. His love will stop at nothing to present us to Himself fully purified "without any kind of stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (cf. **Ephesians 5:27**).

Decision

Repentance: How can you purify your heart?

Action: What is the good you know you ought to do but have not done yet?

Worship: Spend time alone, and be silent in God's presence.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Colossians 2–3**. What are the benefits of self-control? What are the risks?

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:10

B.11 From Gluttony to Self-Control

In Which We Deny Our Bodies to Nurture Our Souls

Memory Verse: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. — Matthew 5:10

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

Chapter 13. Courage under Persecution vs. Self-indulgence

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 3.1 (Self-control) Example: Proverbs about the Tongue

Introduction

While **gluttony** primarily refers to the excessive consumption of food, here we will define it more broadly as **seeking to satisfy our souls by indulging the appetites of the flesh**. Gluttony directly contrasts with **self-control**, which is the ability to align the actions of our body with the desires of the spirit.

Importantly for a Christian, self-control is ultimately about being controlled by God's Spirit. As we mentioned in the previous chapter, God sometimes lets us fall into sins of the flesh to teach us not to trust in our own willpower.

Those who undergo persecution are considered by Jesus to be blessed or lucky because it is obvious to them they cannot pursue physical comfort and the kingdom of heaven at the same time.

Alas, for the rest of us, the temptation to give in to sins of the flesh is far more subtle...

Devotion

Read **Proverbs 9**. What can our choice of food imply about our character?

Bible

Colossians 2-3

Paul begins this chapter the way we should begin our attempts at self-control: by meditating on the mystery and the treasures found in Christ:

{2:1} For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh,

{2} that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, {3} in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

We need to start and end our thinking with Christ, to avoid being taken in by fancy arguments:

{4} Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words.

It is not enough to just believe in Christ:

{5} For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your [good] order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ.

We must make a conscious effort to continue obeying and growing in Him:

{6} As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him,

{7} rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.

Otherwise, it is easy to become seduced by philosophies based on worldly wisdom:

{8} Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.

The virtue of self-control presents peculiar dangers to the Christian, since its worldly version focuses on the self. Indeed, many heresies preach self-control as a way to experience our own personal divinity. This was particularly true for Gnosticism, an early heresy which claimed to have secret teachings from Christ that enabled the “pure” human spirit to conquer the “evil” human body.

To counteract this, Paul emphasizes that Christ was not an immaterial spirit but a complete flesh-and-blood human being. Further, our goal is not to recover our own hidden divinity but to find our fullness in Him:

{9} For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily...

{10} and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

To be sure, our completion in Him involves dying to the sins of the flesh so that we can enter into His life of faith:

{11} In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, {12} buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with [Him] through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.

However, this “circumcision” does not mean casting off our physical body. Just as Christ was raised in the flesh, our new life in Christ is about living out faith “in the flesh.” Our physical bodies are not the problem; sin is the problem, and that is why Christ died:

{13} And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, {14} having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.

Christ did not merely triumph over the sins of the flesh; He triumphed over those of the spirit world:

{15} Having disarmed principalities and powers, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them in it.

Paul sternly warns us against getting caught up in legalistic arguments about external matters. Not because they are intrinsically meaningless, but because they distract from what is important:

{16} So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbath {17} which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.

Crucially, the purpose of self-control is not to build up our human self esteem:

{18} Let no one cheat you of your reward, taking delight in [false] humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind,

Instead, the purpose of self-control is to draw us ever closer to Christ:

{19} and not holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase [that is] from God.

This is a key difference between Biblical holiness and human legalism. The former turns our eyes towards Christ as our source, and fills us with humility and gratitude. The latter focuses on the self, filling us with pride and condemnation.

Alas, the Colossians seem to have lost sight of this distinction and gotten caught up in rules and regulations about food and cleanliness, which is focusing on the temporal rather than the eternal:

{20} Therefore, if you died with Christ from the basic principles of the world, why, as [though] living in the world, do you subject yourselves to regulations— {21} “Do not touch, do not taste, do not handle,”{22} which all concern things which perish with the using—according to the commandments and doctrines of men?

Legalism creates an illusion of godliness that only masquerades the depths of our sin:

{23} These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in self-imposed religion, [false] humility, and neglect of the body, [but are] of no value against the indulgence of the flesh.

The word religion is more literally translated as “will-worship,” which is the disease underlying legalism. The real danger of a legalistic approach to self-control is not so much that it denies us valid pleasures, but it actually strengthens our pride and self-reliance. We strain out the gnats of purely physical sins only to swallow the camel of indulging our rebellious spirits (cf. **Matthew 23:24**).

So what should we do instead?

{3:1} If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. {2} Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

The Christian approach to self-control should be to not look down on our sins but to look up to our heavenly identity with Christ:

{3} For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

As apologist Ravi Zacharias⁶ says, “Jesus did not come into this world to make bad people good. He came to make dead people live.” The source of our strength is not ourselves, but it is Christ, Who is also the only cure for our sin, and our one true hope for glory:

{4} When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory.

Verse 4 does not imply we lack responsibilities of our own:

{5} Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

While it is true we cannot manufacture virtue on our own, there is one thing we can do: put our sins to death by confession and repentance before God. Those who flee from legalism to licentiousness forget that self-indulgent sin is idolatry that places us in the path of God’s wrath:

{6} Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience...

We know all too well how disobedience leads to God’s wrath, which is why we should no longer tolerate sinful behavior:

{7} in which you yourselves once walked when you lived in them.

{8} But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth.

In keeping with our new identity, we are no longer defined by our religion, education, or economic status, but by Christ! The whole point of being saved is to enable us to share in the holy name of Christ, which means it is both a duty and privilege to pursue His character:

{9} Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, {10} and have put on the new [man] who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, {11} where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave [nor] free, but Christ [is] all and in all. {12} Therefore, as [the] elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering...

When we pursue these virtues as gifts from God rather than achievements of our own flesh, we can express compassion—rather than condemnation—for our fellow sinners:

{13} bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also [must do].

The greatest sign of Christ-likeness is not taming our own bodies but showing love to everybody:

{14} But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.

For it is only when we are in Christ and pursuing heavenly love instead of earthly pleasures that we know true peace:

{15} And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful.

This is the real solution to gluttony: having the authentic peace of God ruling over our hearts, so we no longer need to drown out the whimpering of our souls through carnal indulgence. In

⁶ **There Is None Good But God** <http://www.rzim.org>

fact, a peace this strong can even rejoice amidst persecution, knowing that our heavenly reward outweighs these “light and momentary afflictions” (cf. **2 Corinthians 4:17**).

We will explore the path to peace more fully in the next module, but Paul gives us a pretty good hint in the next verse:

{16} Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Lest we forget, Paul reminds us that it all comes back to living our lives in the holy name of Jesus:

{17} And [whatever] you do in word or deed, [do] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Will you accept Paul’s challenge to fill your heart with undying gratitude instead of your stomach with food that never satisfies?

Decision

Repentance: Which of the vices in verses **3:6** and **3:8** do you need to put off?

Action: Which of the virtues in **3:12–14** will you seek to put on?

Worship: Sing a psalm, hymn, or spiritual song to God with grace and gratitude in your heart.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Philippians 3**. What is Paul’s glory?

Memory Verse: For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. — Habakkuk 2:14

B.12 From Shame to Glory

In Which God Is Glorified amidst Our Shame, If We Choose His Glory over Ours

Memory Verse: For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea. — Habakkuk 2:14

Assigned Reading

Peter Kreeft – **Back to Virtue**

In Conclusion: The Winsomeness of Virtue

Dick Hockett – **Foundations of Wisdom**

Chapter 7. The Wise

Introduction

As we finish this module, the most important lesson to remember is that wisdom and virtue are essential, yet they are impossible. No matter how much we try or mature, we will never quite be able to fulfill everything God, society, or even ourselves expect of us. By God's grace we may continue to improve, but we will never be perfect.

Western culture rarely admits the resulting sense of shame, but we still suffer its effects. The ultimate question is whether we will be honest enough to submit our shame to the cross of Christ, so that He can heal us for His glory, or will we proudly cling to our own glory and remain Simple, Mockers, and Fools?

Devotion

Read **Habakkuk 2**. Who does God shame? Who gets the glory?

Bible

Philippians 3

The pursuit of virtue is a long and difficult road, and it is easy to become discouraged. That is why Paul begins his wrap-up of Philippians, as we begin our wrap-up of this module, with a reminder to rejoice:

{3:1} Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord. For me to write the same things to you is not tedious, but for you it is safe.

As G.K. Chesterton⁷ said, “Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian.” The joy of the Lord is our secret weapon (cf. **Nehemiah 8:10**) in defending against those who use religion to shame us:

{2} Beware of dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation!

When we worship God in Christ by the Spirit, we neither rely on nor become ashamed of our weak wills:

{3} For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh...

Paul describes himself as anything but weak-willed:

{4} though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: {5} circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, [of] the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; {6} concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

In verses 4–6, Paul identifies many of the same things from which we attempt to find our glory:

religious upbringing

ethnicity

ancestors

culture

education and status

religious zeal

professional achievement

legalistic morality

Paul provides an impressive list. Are you tempted to envy his achievements?

Paul considers them all a waste of time:

{7} But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. {8} Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ...

Paul treats them as garbage because they were all based on glorifying himself instead of relying on a relationship with Christ:

{9} and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which [is] from the law, but that which [is] through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith...

This is one of the grand paradoxes of Christianity: the only secure path to self-esteem and personal holiness lies in admitting our unworthiness and incompetence and crying out to God in faith to grant us His righteousness. Holiness is ultimately about surrender to a person rather than perfection in our behavior.

⁷ **Orthodoxy:** The Romance of the Faith

Paul no longer needs to feel good about himself by observing the law. His sole remaining desire is simply to know Jesus better:

{10} that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death...

Paul's life has become a great and terrible quest to know the following:

Christ

The power of His resurrection

The fellowship of His sufferings, and

Conformity with His death

Many of us sincerely desire to know Christ and His power, but are we equally eager to follow Him into suffering and death?

Paul does this gladly, for the hope of the resurrection:

{11} if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

We might think this is easy for Paul, since he has already reached a place of spiritual perfection, but that is not what he says:

{12} Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. {13} Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing [I do], forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, {14} I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Despite what you may have heard, holiness is not having a complete understanding of biblical truth or perfect conformity to Christ's character. Rather, a holy Christian is someone who is committed to spending the rest of their life in pursuit of Christ and has learned to continually lay aside anything that gets in their way.

The immature Christian thinks holiness is all about following rules and learning truths. As such, they are alternately filled with pride (when they succeed) or shame (when they fail). In the end, they are no better off than Paul was before he met Christ.

The mature Christian realizes following rules and learning truths can be useful (as we will study in the next module) yet knows they are only the means, not the end. Ultimately, the only goal worth pursuing is Christ Himself, and the closer we get to Him, the more we realize how far we fall short (cf. **1 Timothy 1:15**) of perfection. Instead of filling us with shame at our own sinfulness, this realization fills us with awe at Christ's transcendent glory. We no longer pursue our own righteousness to salvage our own reputation, but pursue Christ and His righteousness to magnify His glory!

This definition of maturity may be hard for some of you to accept. Fortunately, it is not necessary for us to agree about everything:

{15} Therefore let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you.

The important thing is to submit to God's authority and live out everything you do understand:

{16} Nevertheless, to [the degree] that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind.

If nothing else, we can follow in the footsteps of those who reflect the holiness of Christ better than we do:

{17} Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern.

Many leaders, religious and otherwise, cling to their flesh and hide their shame rather than glorying in the cross of Christ:

{18} For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, [that they are] the enemies of the cross of Christ: {19} whose end [is] destruction, whose god [is their] belly, and [whose] glory [is] in their shame—who set their mind on earthly things.

Here is the ultimate choice we face: will we fight for our own glory in order to hide our shame, or will we surrender our shame at the foot of the cross so that Christ can glorify Himself in us, and give us His holiness?

{20} For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, {21} who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Decision

Repentance: What hidden shame must you surrender to the cross of Christ? How?

Action: Find a Christ-like example of someone (living or dead) you can follow in your ongoing pursuit of virtue.

Worship: Reflect on our heavenly citizenship and the glorious transformation that awaits our bodies.

For Next Session

Our next module (“Serve Faithfully”) will focus on how the spiritual disciplines enable God to make us holy. To prepare, read through the book of **Hebrews** and meditate on how we enter into God’s rest.

C. Serve Faithfully

“I Make Holy”

C. Serve Faithfully

In Part A, we explored God's holiness through the narrative of creation, corruption, and redemption.

In Part B, we pictured human holiness through the lens of wisdom and virtue.

In Part C, we will dive into the mechanics of how God's holiness becomes our holiness.

Our focus is on the classic spiritual disciplines recorded in Scripture. Unlike human disciplines, which seek to build ourselves up, spiritual disciplines are designed to **empty us so that God can fill us** with His holiness.

Assigned Reading

Though their content overlaps, students should ideally read both of the following:

Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth by Richard Foster

Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life by Donald Whitney

C.1 Desire and Discipline

In Which Our Desire for God's Name Inspires Us to Submit to His Discipline

Memory Verse: Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us. — Hebrews 12:1

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Introduction

Chapter 1. The Spiritual Disciplines: Door to Liberation

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Introduction

Chapter 1. The Spiritual Disciplines... for the Purpose of Godliness

Introduction

Spiritual disciplines are powerful tools for forming the character of God in our lives. However, it is essential to remember that the disciplines are only effective if they are not considered ends in themselves, but as means to our greatest desire: Christ Himself and His holiness.

Devotion

Read **1 Corinthians 9**. Why does Paul discipline himself? Is it for the sake of the Law?

Bible

Hebrews 12

Chapter 12 begins where Lesson B.2 on faith leaves off, as faith turns into works:

{12:1} Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us...

The Bible is abundantly clear that both salvation (cf. **Ephesians 2:8**) and sanctification (cf. **Galatians 3:3**) are due to God's work of grace appropriated by faith through His Spirit, not as a result of our own efforts. At the same time, there is much required of us. The opening verse of Hebrews 12 helpfully identifies two of our primary tasks:

Laying aside sin and distractions

Persevering in the pursuit of whatever God has called us to do

Importantly, we must not (and frankly cannot) complete these tasks on our own strength or out of a sense of fear and obligation. Instead, these tasks can only be completed in and through the love of Jesus:

{2} looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Jesus is our inspiration, our empowerment, and our assurance. Like Him, we must fix our eyes on the joy that awaits us in order to successfully endure the cup set before us (cf. **Luke 22:42**) because there is much to endure in this life:

{3} For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.

It is essential to focus on Jesus and remember the examples of those who have gone before us if we are to have the strength and courage to fight against sin:

{4} You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin.

Alas, the audience of the Hebrews had forgotten the price of being sons of God (cf. **Proverbs 3:11, 12**) [Note: Women are considered “sons” of God just as much as men are considered “brides” of Christ]:

{5} And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; {6} For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”

This is a pretty strong picture of discipline (another word for “chasten”). While the primary focus of this module is on self-discipline, it is helpful to first understand how and why God disciplines us:

{7} If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? {8} But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

Amazingly, the writer inverts our usual understanding of God. We tend to think God is angry with us when we are disciplined and pleased with us when He leaves us alone. According to the writer of Hebrews, that mindset is precisely backwards: God’s stern chastening is actually a sign of His fatherly love, and those left to blissfully follow their own sinful inclinations are the ones most to be pitied. God deeply desires to shape His children into the image of His holiness.

Perhaps part of the problem is that Western culture no longer appreciates fatherly discipline:

{9} Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected [us], and we paid [them] respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? {10} For they indeed for a few days chastened [us] as seemed [best] to them, but He for [our] profit, that [we] may be partakers of His holiness.

Either because our fathers failed to discipline us or because they disciplined us unwisely, too many of us have never really learned to respect paternal authority. Misunderstanding human authority makes it that much harder to subject ourselves to God’s perfect discipline.

Of course being chastened is never easy, but it is always worth it:

{11} Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Once we understand that discipline is necessary to train our bodies for the race set before us, we can begin the path of self-discipline:

{12} Therefore strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, {13} and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be [dislocated], but rather be healed.

This training covers both our external relationships and our inward character:

{14} Pursue peace with all [people], and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord...

If we neglect discipline, we will not be able to see Jesus or enjoy His grace. Instead, we will make ourselves vulnerable to bitterness and folly:

{15} looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled; {16} lest there [be] any fornicator or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright.

More than vulnerability, without discipline our temporary comfort will end in our everlasting regret:

{17} For you know that afterward, when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it diligently with tears.

To drive this point home, the writer contrasts the grandeur and terror of Mount Sinai (cf. **Exodus 19**) with the even more glorious and far more welcoming Mount Zion (cf. **Revelations 21**):

{18} For you have not come to the mountain that may be touched and that burned with fire, and to blackness and darkness and tempest, {19} and the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words, so that those who heard [it] begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore. {20} (For they could not endure what was commanded: "And if so much as a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned or shot with an arrow." {21} And so terrifying was the sight [that] Moses said, "I am exceedingly afraid and trembling.") {22} But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels, {23} to the general assembly and church of the firstborn [who are] registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, {24} to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than [that of] Abel.

Though the terms of the new covenant are infinitely more generous than those of the old covenant, it is even more necessary to abide by them:

{25} See that you do not refuse Him who speaks. For if they did not escape who refused Him who spoke on earth, much more [shall we not escape] if we turn away from Him who [speaks] from heaven...

A heavenly gift has a heavenly cost:

{26} whose voice then shook the earth; but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I shake not only the earth, but also heaven."

We can only endure if we build our lives around the one thing that can never be shaken: the unalterable holiness of God Himself.

{27} Now this, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of those things that are being shaken, as of things that are made, that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

We must serve God in all humility and awe by His grace:

{28} Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.

These then are the tensions with which we must live as we pursue spiritual discipline:

strenuous endurance vs. utter reliance on God

already made perfect vs. a race yet to be run

God as Father vs. God as Judge

future joy vs. present suffering

Though Jesus has already paid the full price for our sin, there is a price we must pay to manifest God’s glory here on earth (cf. **Colossians 1:24**). God will not rest until His holiness is revealed in us, even if He has to destroy everything that gets in His way:

{29} For our God [is] a consuming fire.

The question is, will we (can we?) endure the discipline of submitting ourselves to that “fire”?

Decision

Repentance: What “roots” does God’s consuming fire need to burn away in your life?

Action: Where do you need to build endurance for the “race set before you”?

Worship: Tell God how it feels to approach Him on Mount Zion, instead of on Mount Sinai.

For Next Week

For next week, read **1 Timothy 4**. How does Paul tell Timothy to pursue godliness?

Memory Verse: Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. — 1 Timothy 4:15–16

C.2 Meditation and Memorization

In Which We Dwell on God's Word As It Dwells in Us

Memory Verse: Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you. — 1 Timothy 4:15–16

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Part I. The Inward Disciplines

Chapter 2. Meditation

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 3. Bible Intake (Part II)

Introduction

The purpose of spiritual discipline is to bring us into the presence of God, and nothing is more effective for that purpose than deep meditation upon and memorization of Scripture. Eastern meditation is about emptying oneself and detaching oneself from the world. In contrast, Christian meditation is about drawing near to the Father, taking on the mind of Christ, and being filled with His Spirit.

Devotion

Read **Joshua 1**. Why does God tell Joshua to meditate on the Book of the Law?

Bible

1 Timothy 4

Even though we walk by the Spirit, it is essential that we also be grounded in God's written Word, lest we fall prey to deception and become deceivers ourselves:

{4:1} Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, {2} speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron...

Though they themselves ignore the true law, such deceivers often burden their followers with an ascetic legalism:

{3} forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from foods which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth.

These deceivers also deprive God's people of the wholesome pleasures He intends for us to enjoy:

{4} For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; {5} for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.

This is key. Apart from the "word of God"—which can be interpreted as either Scripture or Christ—nothing is truly holy. When submitted to His word, however, everything in God's creation brings nourishment instead of condemnation:

{6} If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed.

Of course, it is not enough to merely feast on sound doctrine; we must also exercise:

{7} But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness.

As we discussed earlier, the purpose of discipline is godliness, which requires us to exert ourselves to submit to God's holiness.

Paul, who must have been in excellent physical condition to survive his many hardships (cf. **2 Cor. 11:24–27**), takes pains to remind us that spiritual conditioning is still far more important than physical conditioning:

{8} For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. {9} This [is] a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance.

In fact, Paul sees spiritual fruit as the primary goal of his physical efforts:

{10} For to this [end] we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is [the] Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.

Paul sees no conflict between his own physical and spiritual labor and God's sovereign salvation, but he considers the former a logical consequence of the latter.

Paul also urges Timothy to pursue the same godliness with authority, despite his youth:

{11} These things command and teach. {12} Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

Timothy is called to represent Paul, to do locally what Paul cannot do from a distance:

{13} Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.

Paul's priorities for how to lead a church to godliness can be summarized as the following:

Reading the Word of God in both private study and public proclamation

Exhorting followers to conform their lives to God's character as revealed in His Word

Nurturing an intellectual understanding of God's truth as revealed in His Word

Clearly, godliness begins by reading God's Word.

Among other things, God's Word is the foundation for the proper use of all spiritual gifts:

{14} Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.

Paul commands Timothy to continually reflect upon the Word:

{15} Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all.

Like verse 9, verse 15 is also a trustworthy saying worthy of full acceptance. If we want our lives to manifest visible progress towards godliness, we must do as Timothy did. By reading God's Word and meditating upon its truths, we positively influence ourselves and others:

{16} Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

From everything we know about Timothy, he did in fact heed Paul's advice and left an eternal impact for the Kingdom of God. Will we do the same?

Decision

Repentance: Ask God to show you where you might be deceived.

Action: Commit to a regular time of reading and meditating on God's Word.

Worship: Meditate on God's goodness, as revealed in the many gifts you have been given.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Matthew 6**. What kind of prayer does the Father reward?

Memory Verse: Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. — Matthew 6:31–33

C.3 Persistent Prayer

In Which We and the World Are Transformed As We Pray to the Father

Memory Verse: Therefore do not worry, saying, “What shall we eat?” or “What shall we drink?” or “What shall we wear?” For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. — Matthew 6:31–33

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 3. Prayer

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 4. Prayer

Introduction

Prayer is the process of aligning our thoughts, desires, and decisions with the holy name of God. As we do so, His Spirit works through us to transform our lives, our relationships, and our world. We don’t know exactly how prayer works; we just know that it does.

Devotion

Read **Luke 18**. How can we have confidence God will answer our prayers?

Bible

Matthew 6

Our study on prayer begins with a reminder that we should look to God, not men, for our reward:

{6:1} “Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. {2} Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward.

As Jesus implies in the following verses, pursuing human approval hinders God’s approval:

{3} But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, {4} that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly.

This same phenomenon is particularly true of prayer:

{5} And when you pray, you shall not be like the hypocrites. For they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. {6} But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who [is] in the secret [place]; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Jesus does not mean we should never let anyone see us pray (after all, Jesus frequently prayed in front of the disciples). Rather, we need to make sure our prayers are genuinely directed towards our heavenly Father, instead of putting on a show for Him or those around us:

{7} And when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen [do]. For they think that they will be heard for their many words.

For us as Christians, prayer is emphatically not a religious ritual we perform to impress God with our sincerity or devotion, nor is it telling God that which we think He does not know:

{8} Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him.

If that is not prayer, then what is prayer?

{9} In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name.

The primary goal of prayer is to see God's "name" (His identity and character) "hallowed" (revealed, honored, and glorified as holy) in the world around us. The heart of prayer is exercising our human will and words to invite God's holiness to manifest itself over every aspect of our lives:

{10} Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as [it is] in heaven.

We are to relinquish our daily and deepest needs to Him, especially our need for forgiveness:

{11} Give us this day our daily bread. {12} And forgive us our debts, As we forgive our debtors. {13} And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

To pray wisely requires recognizing and whole-heartedly submitting to our proper place in God's "very good" creation. If we fail to glorify God as He deserves, we will become blinded by our own righteousness and self-importance, exposing ourselves to all manner of temptation and the devil's schemes.

There is no better way to humbly acknowledge our need for God's mercy than to show that same mercy to others:

{14} For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.

Conversely, proudly denying forgiveness to others places us in the path of God's wrath (cf. **Matthew 18:34**):

{15} But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

The requirements for prayer and alms mirror those for fasting, which we will study next week:

{16} Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. {17} But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, {18} so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, but to your Father who [is] in the secret [place]; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly.

Our hearts must choose whether to pursue mortal treasure from the hands of man or heavenly treasure from the Father:

{19} Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; {20} but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. {21} For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Our souls will reflect whatever we look to for our reward:

{22} The lamp of the body is the eye. If therefore your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. {23} But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in you is darkness, how great [is] that darkness!

Jesus tells us we cannot have it both ways:

{24} No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

It sounds reasonable enough, but the implications of verses 19–24 are quite shocking. Is it really true that we become whatever we focus on? Can we really not focus on more than one thing?

If so, it is no wonder Jesus forbids us from wasting our time focusing on the mere essentials of life!

{25} “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing?

Jesus forbids us to worry about earthly needs for several reasons:

It is much more important to serve God and obtain heavenly treasure than it is to serve mammon and obtain earthly treasure.

Because God is our loving Father, we can trust Him to provide whatever we truly need:

{26} Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?

Worrying our hearts by serving mammon does not ultimately accomplish anything of value:

{27} Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? {28} So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; {29} and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

So, why worry?

{30} Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, [will He] not much more [clothe] you, O you of little faith? {31} Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’

Yes, we may need these things, but God already knows that:

{32} For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things.

The basis of Christian prayer is also the basis of a worry-free life. When we realize that our Heavenly Father knows what we need, we can rest assured He desires us to give us His very best.

However, we will not necessarily get it; not because He is unwilling, but because we are! Though God does not require many words from us or any sacrifice beyond that of Christ, His generosity is conditional:

{33} But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.

Unlike pagan rituals, verse 33’s criterion is not some arbitrary standard God imposes just because He can. Instead, it is the essential posture our hearts must have in order to receive all that God has for us. Like a cup, we can only be filled when we are right-side up.

Nothing God desires to give us through prayer will do us any good if our eyes are darkened by a focus on earthly treasures. It is only when we “lift up our eyes” (cf. **Isaiah 40:26**) that God can pour down His riches upon us and fill our hearts with His light.

{34} Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day [is] its own trouble.

The choice is yours: will you worry, or will you pray?

Decision

Repentance: What worries do you have that reflect the “kingdom of mammon”?

Action: For which of your needs will you trust God by seeking His kingdom first?

Worship: Acknowledge that all glory, power, and kingship belong to God alone, forever and ever. Amen!

For Next Week

For next week, read **Joel 2**. Why does God command the Israelites to fast?

Memory Verse: “Now, therefore, says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. —Joel 2:12–13

C.4 Fervent Fasting

In Which We Slow Down To Feast on the Lord's Name

Memory Verse: “Now, therefore, says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.” So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness; and He relents from doing harm. —Joel 2:12–13

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 4. Fasting

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 9. Fasting

Introduction

Throughout the Old and New Testament, God's people have fasted to express sorrow, repentance, and desperation. In ways we only partly understand, these acts of physical denial open up our spirits to experience God in deeper and more powerful ways.

For Christians, fasting is less an obligation than it is a privilege, as it offers the opportunity to enjoy a special time of intimacy with our Bridegroom despite his physical absence (cf. **Mark 2:18–20**). If anything, this opportunity for intimacy with the Lord makes fasting even more important to not neglect...

Devotion

Read **Nehemiah 1**. Why does Nehemiah fast?

Bible

Joel 2

For this lesson, we will turn to the Old Testament to see the central role fasting plays in a time of national crisis:

{2:1} Blow the trumpet in Zion, And sound an alarm in My holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble; For the day of the LORD is coming, For it is at hand:

Though we Christians see the Lord's coming as a joyous occasion, the Israelites associated the day of the Lord with judgment:

{2} A day of darkness and gloominess, A day of clouds and thick darkness, Like the morning [clouds] spread over the mountains. A people [come], great and strong, The like of whom has never been; Nor will there ever be any [such] after them, Even for many successive generations.

According to the Israelites, no man can withstand His judgment:

{3} A fire devours before them, And behind them a flame burns; The land [is] like the Garden of Eden before them, And behind them a desolate wilderness; Surely nothing shall escape them.

These instruments of judgment intimidate with their appearance:

{4} Their appearance is like the appearance of horses; And like swift steeds, so they run. {5} With a noise like chariots Over mountaintops they leap, Like the noise of a flaming fire that devours the stubble, Like a strong people set in battle array. {6} Before them the people writhe in pain; All faces are drained of color.

They also intimidate those they judge with their competence:

{7} They run like mighty men, They climb the wall like men of war; Every one marches in formation, And they do not break ranks. {8} They do not push one another; Every one marches in his own column. Though they lunge between the weapons, They are not cut down. {9} They run to and fro in the city, They run on the wall; They climb into the houses, They enter at the windows like a thief.

Scholars disagree about exactly how much is literal versus figurative in this passage. For example, are the “people great and strong” in verse 2 actually locusts?

Regardless of its interpretation, clearly something very serious is going on in this passage:

{10} The earth quakes before them, The heavens tremble; The sun and moon grow dark, And the stars diminish their brightness.

Worse, this devastating force descending upon Israel is considered by God as His own private army:

{11} The LORD gives voice before His army, For His camp is very great; For strong [is the One] who executes His word. For the day of the LORD [is] great and very terrible; Who can endure it?

If God Himself is leading enemies against us, what is left for us to do?

Repent!

{12} “Now, therefore,” says the LORD, “Turn to Me with all your heart, With fasting, with weeping, and with mourning.”

Though we have been reconciled to God in Christ (cf. **2 Corinthians 5:18**), our carnal nature (cf. **Romans 8:7**) still seeks to live by the world’s terms, thus making it an enemy of God (cf. **James 4:4**). If we insist on clinging to our pride, we will end up opposing God (cf. **1 Peter 5:5** and **James 4:6**).

The only cure for pride is to pour out our hearts before God in a cry for mercy, since He will not despise a broken spirit (cf. **Psalms 51:17**).

{13} So rend your heart, and not your garments; Return to the LORD your God, For He [is] gracious and merciful, Slow to anger, and of great kindness; And He relents from doing

harm. {14} Who knows [if] He will turn and relent, And leave a blessing behind Him— A grain offering and a drink offering For the LORD your God?

There are two important caveats noted here. First, it is not enough to go through ritualistic ceremonies; we must humble ourselves on the inside, not just on the outside. Second, fasting is no guarantee God will do whatever we ask (cf. **2 Samuel 12**). Though He is merciful, we cannot take His mercy for granted.

Yet we still need to ask for that mercy:

{15} Blow the trumpet in Zion, Consecrate a fast, Call a sacred assembly; {16} Gather the people, Sanctify the congregation, Assemble the elders, Gather the children and nursing babes; Let the bridegroom go out from his chamber, And the bride from her dressing room. {17} Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, Weep between the porch and the altar; Let them say, “Spare Your people, O LORD, And do not give Your heritage to reproach, That the nations should rule over them. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where [is] their God?’ “

And if it is in accord with the glory of the Lord’s name, He will answer us:

{18} Then the LORD will be zealous for His land, And pity His people.

He will likewise pour out blessing instead of wrath:

{19} The LORD will answer and say to His people, “Behold, I will send you grain and new wine and oil, And you will be satisfied by them; I will no longer make you a reproach among the nations.

One of the paradoxes of fasting is that as we deny ourselves our own food, God provides us with His (cf. **Matthew 5:6**).

Another great spiritual mystery is that when we humble ourselves before God, He no longer marches against us with our enemies but punishes them for their misdeeds:

{20} But I will remove far from you the northern [army], And will drive him away into a barren and desolate land, With his face toward the eastern sea And his back toward the western sea; His stench will come up, And his foul odor will rise, Because he has done monstrous things.

Instead of dreading the “monstrous” (gadal) work of the enemy, we can rejoice in the “marvelous” (again, gadal) work of the Lord:

{21} Fear not, O land; Be glad and rejoice, For the LORD has done marvelous things! {22} Do not be afraid, you beasts of the field; For the open pastures are springing up, And the tree bears its fruit; The fig tree and the vine yield their strength. {23} Be glad then, you children of Zion, And rejoice in the LORD your God; For He has given you the former rain faithfully, And He will cause the rain to come down for you— The former rain, And the latter rain in the first [month]. {24} The threshing floors shall be full of wheat, And the vats shall overflow with new wine and oil.

Perhaps even more marvelous than the promise of a glorious future, He promises to redeem our past:

{25} So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, The crawling locust, The consuming locust, And the chewing locust, My great army which I sent among

you. {26} You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, And praise the name of the LORD your God, Who has dealt wondrously with you; And My people shall never be put to shame.

Wow. Selah.

We do not fast out of some ascetic need to punish ourselves. Instead, we fast in the hope of feasting once God's glory and holiness are revealed. We fast to humble ourselves and own up to our shame so that it can ultimately be taken away forever:

{27} Then you shall know that I [am] in the midst of Israel: I [am] the LORD your God And there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame.

Our overriding goal is to experience the manifest presence of God in our midst in order to be transformed and become transformers:

{28} And it shall come to pass afterward that I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. {29} And also on [My] menservants and on [My] maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.

If we call on the name of the Lord, we can rest assured He will call us when the final day of the Lord comes:

{30} And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth: Blood and fire and pillars of smoke. {31} The sun shall be turned into darkness, And the moon into blood, Before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. {32} And it shall come to pass [That] whoever calls on the name of the LORD Shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance, As the LORD has said, Among the remnant whom the LORD calls.

The Lord is calling us even now. Will we humble ourselves to call on Him?

Decision

Repentance: Fast, weep, and mourn over the ways you've mocked God.

Action: Ask God for His Spirit to grant you prophecies, dreams, or visions.

Worship: Call on the "name" of the Lord, as revealed in this week's passage.

For Next Week

For next week, read **2 Timothy 2**. Why does Paul command Timothy to study the Word?

Memory Verse: Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. — 2 Timothy 2:15

C.5 Studying Scripture

In Which Diligently Searching God's Word Leads Us to Truth

Memory Verse: Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. — 2 Timothy 2:15

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 5. Study

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 2. Bible Intake (Part I)

Introduction

Few spiritual disciplines are as essential—or as dangerous—as studying the words and works of God. Used in the wrong spirit, theology can become a heavy burden or a useless distraction (cf. **Matthew 23:4**). But when taught by the Holy Spirit, God's Word becomes our very source of life (cf. **Luke 4:4**). The challenge for us, as it was with Timothy, is whether or not we will apply God's Word rightly...

Devotion

Read **2 Kings 22–23**. How does reading the Book of the Covenant impact the nation?

Bible

2 Timothy 2

In the previous chapter, Paul recounts the faithfulness of many people Timothy has known. Now, Paul urges Timothy to build on their example:

{2:1} You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

In particular, he charges Timothy to ensure that Paul's teaching about Jesus will continue to be passed along:

{2} And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

As we noted at the very beginning of this course, a key reason we have (and trust) Scripture is because of the faithful men and women who endured so much to bring us God's Word.

Like Timothy, we have an obligation to do the same:

{3} You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.

Paul elaborates on this mandate using illustrations from three different professions:

{4} No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier.

{5} And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules.

{6} The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops.

Effectively transmitting the Word of God requires focus, obedience, and hard work, but the payoff rests in pleasing our Commanding Officer, receiving an eternal crown, and sharing in the resulting harvest.

This is no small matter, which is why Paul urges Timothy to carefully think it through:

{7} Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things.

Paul particularly encourages Timothy in light of what Jesus and Paul himself have gone through:

{8} Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel, {9} for which I suffer trouble as an evildoer, [even] to the point of chains; but the word of God is not chained. {10} Therefore I endure all things for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

Paul does not mind suffering if it results in the glorification of God's Word. Paul knows that when the gospel is unleashed, salvation will come to everyone who is called as the "elect" (eklektos).

Paul appears to employ a creed-like quotation to emphasize these points:

{11} [This is] a faithful saying:

For if we died with [Him], We shall also live with [Him].

{12} If we endure, We shall also reign with [Him].

If we deny [Him], He also will deny us.

{13} If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

Note the contrast between the consequences of explicit denial versus the consequences of mere faithlessness; God understands our weakness, but He will not tolerate our rejection.

Of course, it is better to avoid both types of failure and remain faithful to the charge the Lord has laid upon us:

{14} Remind [them] of these things, charging [them] before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin of the hearers.

This is a sober warning for those engaged in study, as we are. Since not all words are profitable, we must continually bear in mind both the purpose of our study and the price Christ paid to bring us God's logos.

Lest we create more harm than good, we must be unceasingly diligent:

{15} Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

Note that the focus here is not on policing others but on caring for our own souls. The key is to remember our Commander and seek to honor Him in all our efforts. In order to do this and avoid

dangerous digressions we must immerse ourselves in the whole Word of God, so that we understand and serve His holy purpose.

{16} But shun profane [and] idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. {17a} And their message will spread like cancer.

This is an excellent test: regardless of how popular or unpopular our theology is, does it merely create ungodly disputes, or does it promote the formation of godly character?

An even more foundational test is whether or not our teaching promotes belief in the truth:

{17b} Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, {18} who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some.

At times like this, it is good to remember that the One who is the Truth, the Way, and the Life (cf. **John 14:6**) can never be overthrown:

{19} Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

Though the Lord has chosen us, we still have an obligation to purify ourselves:

{20} But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. {21} Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.

Self-purification involves both avoiding sin and cultivating virtue personally and communally:

{22} Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart.

We must be extremely careful in our choice of friends. It is good to partner with those who are zealous for the Lord, provided their zeal does not lead to argumentativeness:

{23} But avoid foolish and ignorant disputes, knowing that they generate strife.

True godliness is not puffed up and eager to prove others wrong (cf. **1 Corinthians 8:1**); it is meek:

{24} And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient...

Remember, our goal is not to win theological disputes. Our goal is to serve others in all humility so that by God’s Spirit they may come to embrace His truth:

{25} in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth...

We wrestle not against flesh and blood (cf. **Ephesians 6:12**) but against the schemes of the evil one:

{26} and [that] they may come to their senses [and] [escape] the snare of the devil, having been taken captive by him to [do] his will.

Are we willing to endure whatever is necessary to liberate those who oppose us?

Decision

Repentance: Where are you prone to profane and idle babbling?

Action: When will you consistently “pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace with those who call on the Lord”?

Worship: Reflect on the price Christ paid to bring His Word to us.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Luke 12**. What characterizes a good steward?

Memory Verse: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. — Luke 12:34

C.6 Stewardship and Simplicity

In Which God Reminds Us That All Our Money Is Ultimately His

Memory Verse: For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. — Luke 12:34

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Part II. The Outward Disciplines

Chapter 6. Simplicity

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 8. Stewardship

Introduction

Stewardship is closely related to the virtue of generosity we studied in the last module. While that lesson focused primarily on our attitude towards money, here we will focus more on our attitude towards God. True stewardship includes financial wisdom, but it also includes a general attitude towards all of our resources (e.g., time, energy, and attention).

In particular, we practice the discipline of simplicity in order to both reflect and reinforce our devotion to the Master to whom we are stewards. The discipline of simplicity prevents us from wasting our resources by trying to glorify ourselves, and it paradoxically allows God to glorify us in Him!

Devotion

Read **Mark 12**. What makes a good steward?

Bible

Luke 12

In the previous chapter, Jesus has some very sharp words for the Pharisees—and He is not finished yet:

{12:1} In the meantime, when an innumerable multitude of people had gathered together, so that they trampled one another, He began to say to His disciples first of all, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.

The word hypocrisy implies playing a part. Jesus warns His disciples against the seductive idea that righteousness can be measured by how we act in public and that our “private” sins do not really matter:

{2} For there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, nor hidden that will not be known. {3} Therefore whatever you have spoken in the dark will be heard in the light, and what you have spoken in the ear in inner rooms will be proclaimed on the housetops.

More importantly, we should not be concerned with a human audience at all:

{4} And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. {5} But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him!

Though we should fear God, Jesus paradoxically exhorts us not to fear, because we are valued by God:

{6} Are not five sparrows sold for two copper coins? And not one of them is forgotten before God. {7} But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.

The important thing, apparently, is to stay on God’s side, especially when it comes to the Holy Spirit:

{8} Also I say to you, whoever confesses Me before men, him the Son of Man also will confess before the angels of God. {9} But he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God. {10} And anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but to him who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven.

Jesus came not to condemn, but to forgive (cf. **Luke 23:34**). However, when the Holy Spirit speaks—in the life of Jesus, the words of Scripture, and His whispers into our hearts—we either obey, or we call Him a liar and the devil. The latter comes with dire consequences.

Conversely, once we learn how to listen and submit to the Holy Spirit, we need fear neither God nor man:

{11} Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. {12} For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

Like we often do, the crowd wants Jesus to deal with more earthly problems:

{13} Then one from the crowd said to Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.”

But Jesus refuses to be drawn in:

{14} But He said to him, “Man, who made Me a judge or an arbitrator over you?”

Moreover, He acknowledges the dangerous attitude behind their request:

{15} And He said to them, “Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”

Money is very useful to those of us who live on the earth, but that very utility makes it a potential idol:

{16} Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. {17} And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ {18} So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods.

The rich man’s problem is not necessarily his prudence (cf. **Proverbs 6:6**), but his using his wealth to justify both self-indulgence and a false sense of security:

{19} And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, [and] be merry.” ‘

His illusion of security is soon dispelled:

{20} But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’

He who tries to save his life will lose it (cf. **Luke 9:24**):

{21} So [is] he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.

So what should we do instead?

First of all, as we have been told before, we are not to worry:

{22} Then He said to His disciples, “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. {23} Life is more than food, and the body [is more] than clothing.

{24} Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, which have neither storehouse nor barn; and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds?

{25} And which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature? {26} If you then are not able to do [the] least, why are you anxious for the rest?

{27} Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. {28} If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more [will He clothe] you, O [you] of little faith?

{29} And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind.

{30} For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things.

Instead, we are to seek God’s kingdom—His holy name, His presence, and His lordship:

{31} But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.

If we seek Him, He will give us His kingdom—along with everything else we need:

{32} Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

In fact, we can get a head start by reducing our earthly treasure in order to build up heavenly treasure:

{33} Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys. {34} For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Reducing our earthly attachments is a great way to focus our minds on Jesus:

{35} Let your waist be girded and [your] lamps burning; {36} and you yourselves be like men who wait for their master, when he will return from the wedding, that when he comes and knocks they may open to him immediately.

For if we are ready, we will be rewarded:

{37} Blessed [are] those servants whom the master, when he comes, will find watching. Assuredly, I say to you that he will gird himself and have them sit down [to eat], and will come and serve them.

This is an amazing picture of the master serving the servants! It shows how much He values having servants who are prepared to receive Him, especially when he comes unexpectedly:

{38} And if he should come in the second watch, or come in the third watch, and find [them] so, blessed are those servants. {39} But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. {40} Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”

Peter, ever the spokesman, wonders aloud exactly to whom Jesus is addressing:

{41} Then Peter said to Him, “Lord, do You speak this parable [only] to us, or to all [people]?”

As He often does (cf. **Luke 10:36**), Jesus answers with a question:

{42} And the Lord said, “Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom [his] master will make ruler over his household, to give [them their] portion of food in due season?

The implication seems to be that the parable is for any of us who want to be found faithful stewards. For we will all be rewarded according to how we treat our master’s dominion, for good or ill:

{43} Blessed [is] that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. {44} Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all that he has. {45} But if that servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and be drunk, {46} the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for [him], and at an hour when he is not aware, and will cut him in two and appoint [him] his portion with the unbelievers.

If we receive that parable, we are held even more accountable than if we did not:

{47} And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare [himself] or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many [stripes]. {48} But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.

These are harsh words, as Jesus intends them to be:

{49} I came to send fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!

After all, fulfilling the Father’s requirements is not easy for Him either:

{50} But I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how distressed I am till it is accomplished!

The commands of Jesus are radical and threaten the status quo. His comments about being prepared are not relevant only for political persecution, but they pertain to family disputes:

{51} Do [you] suppose that I came to give peace on earth? I tell you, not at all, but rather division. {52} For from now on five in one house will be divided: three against two, and two against three. {53} Father will be divided against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.”

Jesus lists that which should be obvious to anyone who takes time to look:

{54} Then He also said to the multitudes, “Whenever [you see] a cloud rising out of the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming’; and so it is. {55} And when you see the south wind blow, you say, ‘There will be hot weather’; and there is. {56} Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how [is it] you do not discern this time?

Are we so concerned with outward appearances that we ignore spiritual reality? Do we realize the time is short?

{57} Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right?

Does that urgency inspire us to surrender to God everything He deserves?

{58} When you go with your adversary to the magistrate, make every effort along the way to settle with him, lest he drag you to the judge, the judge deliver you to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. {59} I tell you, you shall not depart from there till you have paid the very last mite.”

Are we living complicated lives of hypocrisy and materialism in order to avoid facing the fact that there will be a reckoning?

Decision

Repentance: What resources (e.g., financial, personal, and relational) have you treated as your own instead of God’s?

Action: Where can you simplify your life to sharpen your focus on God’s kingdom?

Worship: How should we fear God?

For Next Week

For next week, read **Luke 4**. Why does Jesus seek out deserted places?

Memory Verse: Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.” — Luke 4:42–43

C.7 Silence and Solitude

In Which We Withdraw from the World To Draw Near to God

Memory Verse: Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place. And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; but He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.” — Luke 4:42–43

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 7. Solitude

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 10. Silence and Solitude

Introduction

The modern world considers solitary confinement and enforced silence among the worst long-term punishments and with good reason; it is terrifying to be cut off from the consolations and diversions of society. However, the very severity of that terror hints at the fertile spiritual soil waiting to be cultivated by those who dare to endure their own company...

Devotion

Read **1 Kings 19**. What happens to Elijah while he is alone with God?

Bible

Luke 4

We start at the very beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, just after his baptism in the Jordan by John (cf. **Luke 3:21**):

{4:1} Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness...

For whatever reason, God often uses the wilderness to refine his saints, to “set them apart” for ministry. Though He was already perfect, even Jesus had to learn obedience through suffering (cf. **Hebrews 5:8**), both spiritually and physically:

{2} being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry.

As he is fond of doing, the devil seizes the opportunity to tempt Jesus in an area of both pride and need:

{3} And the devil said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

Jesus’ Sonship had just been confirmed by a heavenly voice (cf. **Luke 3:22**), so obviously He knew who He was. Surely, Jesus had both the ability and the authority to create His own food, at least in principle.

Yet, Jesus had a reason for withdrawing from human company (and human nourishment). Though He knew what it was to be God, He had to learn when it meant to obey God the way we mortals do. This meant giving up His natural—and supernatural—privileges in submission to God’s Word:

{4} But Jesus answered him, saying, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God.’”

Perhaps this act of self-denial and submission helped prepare Him for the next test:

{5} Then the devil, taking Him up on a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. {6} And the devil said to Him, “All this authority I will give You, and their glory; for [this] has been delivered to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. {7} Therefore, if You will worship before me, all will be Yours.”

We know from the Great Commission (cf. **Lesson A.2**) that all authority is ultimately given to Jesus, yet we also know that Satan is in some sense the “ruler of this world” (cf. **John 14:30**). The devil is apparently offering Jesus a shortcut, a way to achieve His earthly kingdom without having to endure suffering and death. As usual, Satan tempts us by offering glory without requiring holiness.

Jesus—perhaps fortified by forty days of meditating on God’s purpose for His life—rejects the easy way out:

{8} And Jesus answered and said to him, “Get behind Me, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve.’”

Perhaps in desperation, the devil tries one more ploy:

{9} Then he brought Him to Jerusalem, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here. {10} For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you,’ {11} and, ‘In [their] hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.’”

It is sobering to realize that the devil can even quote scripture (cf. **Psalms 91:11**) when it serves His purposes. The Enemy’s knowledge of Scripture illustrates why it is essential for us to not just know the letter of the Law; we must also understand the heart of the Father, so we do not abuse His love for us:

{12} And Jesus answered and said to him, “It has been said, ‘You shall not tempt the LORD your God.’”

Jesus’ response is sufficient to win the battle, but the war continues:

{13} Now when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from Him until an opportune time.

For the moment, though, the combination of time alone with the Spirit and victory over the devil seems to unleash an expanding wave of spiritual power:

{14} Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. {15} And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all.

When Jesus visits His hometown, that wave comes to a head, as He encounters a prophetic word spoken centuries before:

{16} So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. {17} And He was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, He found the place where it was written:{18} “The Spirit of the LORD [is] upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to [the] poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to [the] captives And recovery of sight to [the] blind, [To] set at liberty those who are oppressed; {19} To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.”

The prophecy He read in the synagogue came true that very day:

{20} Then He closed the book, and gave [it] back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. {21} And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Jesus anticipates their amazement and responds quite strongly:

{22} So all bore witness to Him, and marveled at the gracious words which proceeded out of His mouth. And they said, “Is this not Joseph’s son?” {23} He said to them, “You will surely say this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself! Whatever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in Your country.’ “ {24} Then He said, “Assuredly, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own country. {25} But I tell you truly, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a great famine throughout all the land; {26} but to none of them was Elijah sent except to Zarephath, [in the region] of Sidon, to a woman [who was] a widow. {27} And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

His authoritative response earns Him no friends:

{28} So all those in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, {29} and rose up and thrust Him out of the city; and they led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city was built, that they might throw Him down over the cliff. {30} Then passing through the midst of them, He went His way.

Their negative reaction does not appear to slow Him down, for He continues teaching:

{31} Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths. {32} And they were astonished at His teaching, for His word was with authority.

The authority of Jesus’ teaching is not merely intellectual, but also spiritual:

{33} Now in the synagogue there was a man who had a spirit of an unclean demon. And he cried out with a loud voice, {34} saying, “Let [us] alone! What have we to do with You,

Jesus of Nazareth? Did You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!”

{35} But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be quiet, and come out of him!” And when the demon had thrown him in [their] midst, it came out of him and did not hurt him.

{36} Then they were all amazed and spoke among themselves, saying, “What a word this [is]! For with authority and power He commands the unclean spirits, and they come out.” {37} And the report about Him went out into every place in the surrounding region.

His spiritual authority also manifests in physical healing:

{38} Now He arose from the synagogue and entered Simon’s house. But Simon’s wife’s mother was sick with a high fever, and they made request of Him concerning her. {39} So He stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her. And immediately she arose and served them.

{40} When the sun was setting, all those who had any that were sick with various diseases brought them to Him; and He laid His hands on every one of them and healed them.

These miracles are an incredibly powerful witness to who Jesus truly is, yet He does not allow His identity to be freely shared:

{41} And demons also came out of many, crying out and saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of God!” And He, rebuking [them], did not allow them to speak, for they knew that He was the Christ.

Just as the devil can quote Scripture, demons can twist truth to their own ends. While their confession may have arisen spontaneously out of their fear, Jesus knew who He was; what He was doing; and when, how, and to whom He would reveal Himself. He did not become distracted by even seemingly positive nuisances.

Jesus knew who He was because He had spent time alone with His Father, a practice He continued throughout His ministry:

{42a} Now when it was day, He departed and went into a deserted place.

His time of solitude gave Him the courage and focus to follow the path of God, rather than that of the crowd:

{42a} And the crowd sought Him and came to Him, and tried to keep Him from leaving them; {43} but He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, because for this purpose I have been sent.” {44} And He was preaching in the synagogues of Galilee.

Which path will we follow?

Decision

Repentance: Where are you taking the easy way out and missing God’s call?

Action: Where and when will you spend time alone with the Father?

Worship: Meditate on how the words authority and power apply to Jesus in this chapter.

For Next Week

For next week, read **2 Corinthians 4**. Whom does Paul serve? Why?

Memory Verse: For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. — 2 Corinthians 4:5

C.8 Submission and Service

In Which We Triumph by Surrendering

Memory Verse: For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. — 2 Corinthians 4:5

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter	8. Submission
Chapter	9. Service

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter	7. Serving
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Introduction

Submission is the key to understanding and exercising divine authority. The spiritual discipline of submission involves submitting both to God and to other humans, even to those who we might count as inferiors, in order to serve them.

Crucially, our service must not spring from co-dependence or a need to be liked but from a single-minded devotion to our Lord Jesus Christ, who made Himself a servant for our sake.

Only if we serve as Jesus served can we triumph as He triumphs.

Devotion

Read **Luke 7**. What happens when people submit to the authority of Jesus?

Bible

2 Corinthians 4

Serving is not easy. If we only serve out of our human strength, we will ultimately lose heart, which is why it is essential to continually experience God's mercy:

{4:1} Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart.

Experiencing His mercy includes living holy lives transparently before God and man:

{2} But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

Despite our best efforts, there are still some who will never see our true purpose:

{3} But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, {4} whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.

We serve to draw attention to Christ our Lord, not ourselves:

{5} For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake.

God Himself is the only light we can bring to this dark world, and we are merely the carriers:

{6} For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

{7} But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

For reasons we do not always understand, simply acting as a messenger can be dangerous work:

{8} [We are] hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; [we are] perplexed, but not in despair; {9} persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed...

This is both sobering and encouraging. The contrast is between the following:

hard-pressed vs. crushed

perplexity vs. despair

persecuted vs. forsaken

struck down vs. destroyed

In other words, we are beat up but not completely beaten. Though we may suffer greatly, we have not been—and will not be—defeated.

It may seem that we have reached the end of our lives, but that only means we are at the beginning of experiencing His life:

{10} always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. {11} For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. {12} So then death is working in us, but life in you.

The true servant is one who embraces death to bring life to another (cf. **John 15:13**), even to those we do not think deserve it (cf. **Romans 5:7–8**).

Such sacrifice requires great faith not in human nature but in the power of God:

{13} And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed and therefore I spoke," we also believe and therefore speak, {14} knowing that He who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present [us] with you.

It is difficult to love people yet not expect any credit for it:

{15} For all things [are] for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.

When we let go of external things out of love for others, God's grace is unleashed to transform us from the inside out:

{16} Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward [man] is being renewed day by day.

As we grow in the grace and discipline of serving—and the ability to focus on the power and glory of God—the cost feels smaller, and the payoff seems greater:

{17} For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding [and] eternal weight of glory...Serving shifts our vision from earth to heaven (cf. 2 Kings 6:17):

{18} while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen [are] temporary, but the things which are not seen [are] eternal.

Only when we surrender the visible idols of material status and physical power can we receive the heavenly crown of eternal life, which awaits all those who serve and submit in the name of Jesus.

Decision

Repentance: Where do you need to embrace Christ's suffering and death in order to manifest His servant spirit?

Action: How can you shine "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God" this week?

Worship: What are some "unseen and eternal" truths you can thank God for?

For Next Week

For next week, read **James 5**. Why must we deal with sin?

Memory Verse: Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. — James 5:20

C.9 Confrontation and Confession

In Which We Speak the Truth, Even If It Hurts

Memory Verse: Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. — James 5:20

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Part III. The Corporate Disciplines
Chapter 10. Confession

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 11. Journaling

Introduction

Earlier, we discussed reconciliation and forgiveness in the light of Christ's salvation. This week, we will dig into the disciplines that enable them: confession and its handmaiden, confrontation.

Though we love to be forgiven, we generally hate to confess and fear confrontation. We may be ready to face persecution and death for the sake of Christ, yet we find ourselves paralyzed at the thought of admitting our sins to one another, and never mind confronting someone face-to-face with their own sin!

However, confession and confrontation have the potential to break individual and community strongholds of sin that would not otherwise fall. They may be a heavy cross to bear, but if we persevere in them, we shall find a glorious resurrection at the end...

Devotion

Read **Nehemiah 9**. What all is encompassed by the confession of the Israelites?

Bible

James 5

James begins this chapter with a rather dramatic example of confrontation:

{5:1} Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you!

By "miseries," he apparently means the destruction of the treasure in which they placed their hope (cf. **Matthew 6:19**):

{2} Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. {3a} Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire.

Why have their earthly treasures been destroyed?

Helpfully, James does not merely blame the rich for being wealthy; he identifies specific sins they have committed against man and God:

{3b} You have heaped up treasure in the last days.

{4} Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.

{5} You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter.

{6} You have condemned, you have murdered the just; he does not resist you.

From the context (cf. **James 2:6**), it is unlikely that “the rich” are part of James’ primary audience. Instead, he may well be proclaiming their impending judgment in order to encourage those who have been mistreated by them:

{7} Therefore be patient, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See [how] the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. {8} You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

The day of the Lord’s coming is not just a reason to persevere under injustice, but it also serves as a reason to avoid judging others:

{9} Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold, the Judge is standing at the door!

There is a subtle but crucial distinction between James’ confrontation of the rich and the “grumbling” he speaks of here. In our flesh, we typically respond to slights against us (real or imagined) by grumbling or gossiping (cf. **Philippians 2:14**). The way of Christ, however, is to either confront our offenders directly or release them to God, as James does.

The prophets take the same path as Jesus and James do:

{10} My brethren, take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord, as an example of suffering and patience.

They did not speak “in the name of the Lord” out of some perverse desire for self-punishment; they did it out of an understanding of what it means to live holy lives in the fullness of God’s blessing:

{11} Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end [intended by] the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful.

In Christ’s economy, we can endure unfair deprivation knowing that God will reward us. The rich view the world in an opposite light, for they see life as a game to be won by our own power at any cost, even if it means losing their integrity:

{12} But above all, my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or with any other oath. But let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and [your] “No,” “No,” lest you fall into judgment.

If we truly fear God more than the things of this world, we will not be tempted to cut corners with the truth. Instead, we will seek His name first, in good times and in bad:

{13} Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

In particular, fearing God will allow us to freely seek out others in our time of need:

{14} Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

God is faithful to heal us, whether we need physical or spiritual healing:

{15} And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.

Note that we need not only turn to those in positions of formal authority; any believer has the power to express God's forgiveness to a penitent sinner (cf. **John 20:23**):

{16} Confess [your] trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.

The last part of this verse is often used to motivate all kinds of prayer, which is certainly appropriate. However, it is worth remembering that the original context is that of confession; if nothing else, confession is the primary way sinners can become righteous!

Together, confession and prayer really do have the power to move heaven and earth. Elijah knew this well, for he was no stranger to confrontation (cf. **1 Kings 18**):

{17} Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. {18} And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit.

Elijah's glorious story of answered prayer pales in comparison to the impact of confronting someone who has lost their way, to help them find life:

{19} Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, {20} let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins.

Amen!

Decision

Repentance: Find someone safe to whom you can confess your sin.

Action: Who does God want you to confront this week?

Worship: Thank God for covering over a multitude of your sins.

For Next Week

For next week, read **John 4**. What kind of worship is Jesus looking for? Does He find it?

Memory Verse: God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. — John 4:24

C.10 World-Changing Worship

In Which We Give Up the World for God, So We Can Give God to the World

Memory Verse: God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth. — John 4:24

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 11. Worship

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 5. Worship

Chapter 6. Evangelism

Introduction

Worship is simultaneously the most personal and all-encompassing of human experiences. True worship is to encounter the Divine Presence in the very depths of our being, in a posture of absolute stillness and submission.

Such an encounter does not merely empower and inspire us; it also requires us to manifest that same Holy Presence amidst the frenzy and confusion of this present darkness (cf. **Ephesians 6:12**), even to those we deem least likely to respond...

Devotion

Read **2 Chronicles 7**. How does Solomon worship?

Bible

John 4

Our story begins with Jesus on the move:

{4:1} Therefore, when the Lord knew that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John {2} (though Jesus Himself did not baptize, but His disciples), {3} He left Judea and departed again to Galilee.

Since the religious leaders of His day are not very happy with Him, Jesus decides to head back home, even though it means passing through unpleasant territory:

{4} But He needed to go through Samaria. {5} So He came to a city of Samaria which is called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

Samaria was even further down the social ladder than Galilee. Though originally part of David's kingdom, Samaria deteriorated after King Solomon (cf. **1 Kings 12**) and was all but obliterated after the exile (cf. **2 Kings 17**). The Jews did not consider Samaria part of Israel, despite the two nations' strong historical connection:

{6} Now Jacob's well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied from [His] journey, sat thus by the well. It was about the sixth hour.

For his part, Jesus seems more interested in the well as a source of water than as a historical landmark:

{7} A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give Me a drink." {8} For His disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.

Given their historical tension such a request from a Jew to a Samaritan is far from ordinary:

{9} Then the woman of Samaria said to Him, "How is it that You, being a Jew, ask a drink from me, a Samaritan woman?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.

Jesus' response is striking. He neither accepts nor rejects her criticism; He takes her to a different place entirely:

{10} Jesus answered and said to her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, 'Give Me a drink,' you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water."

This passage contains several excellent lessons on evangelism. First, we should avoid getting dragged into common controversies. Second, we should pique people's curiosity:

{11} The woman said to Him, "Sir, You have nothing to draw with, and the well is deep. Where then do You get that living water? {12} Are You greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well, and drank from it himself, as well as his sons and his livestock?"

Her response is probably more incredulous than sincere. Still, Jesus answers her indirectly:

{13} Jesus answered and said to her, "Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, {14} but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life."

Living water sounds good to her, though she is still skeptical:

{15} The woman said to Him, "Sir, give me this water, that I may not thirst, nor come here to draw."

Jesus may give His living water freely, but we still have to pay the price of owning up to our spiritual thirst:

{16} Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come here."

{17} The woman answered and said, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You have well said, 'I have no husband,'

{18} for you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband; in that you spoke truly."

Ouch. Her outcast status as a divorcé and adulterer probably explains why she came to the well at noon by herself, rather than in the cool of the day with the other women.

She is duly impressed by His knowledge of her:

{19} The woman said to Him, "Sir, I perceive that You are a prophet.

However, instead of obeying His command, she poses her own riddle:

{20} Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, and you [Jews] say that in Jerusalem is the place where one ought to worship."

Scholars disagree about whether this is a sincere question or a religious-sounding distraction. Significantly, though, the Samaritan woman's statement in verse 20 harkens back to the same distinction between Jews and Samaritans she addresses earlier. The divide was not merely cultural but spiritual, and it acted as a deep source of shame and resentment among Samaritans.

As someone who has suffered more than her share of shame, this Samaritan woman may have raised the issue of worship preemptively, fearing more than hoping for an answer. Either way, she gets more than she bargained for:

{21} Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe Me, the hour is coming when you will neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, worship the Father.

{22} You worship what you do not know; we know what we worship, for salvation is of the Jews.

This is an astounding position coming from a Jew. In two sentences, Jesus simultaneously affirms and undercuts the Jewish understanding of worship:

{23} But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. {24} God [is] Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

As usual (cf. **Matthew 5:21** et al), He calls us to go beyond mere forms and conventions in order to directly experience the holy name of God. What is unusual is that Jesus shares this profound insight not with the religious leaders, or even with His disciples, but with a doubly-outcast Samaritan woman!

The radical nature of His teaching causes her—either in bewilderment or hope—to raise the "M" word:

{25} The woman said to Him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When He comes, He will tell us all things."

Jesus reveals His identity to her, long before making a similar admission to any Jew:

{26} Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am [He]."

The disciples, as usual, are not merely clueless in this situation; they act cowardly:

{27} And at this [point] His disciples came, and they marveled that He talked with a woman; yet no one said, "What do You seek?" or, "Why are You talking with her?"

In contrast to the disciples, the Samaritan woman is filled with enthusiasm and boldness:

{28} The woman then left her waterpot, went her way into the city, and said to the men,
{29} "Come, see a Man who told me all things that I ever did. Could this be the Christ?" {30} Then they went out of the city and came to Him.

While the living water begins pouring forth, the disciples are worried about His lunch:

{31} In the meantime His disciples urged Him, saying, "Rabbi, eat."

{32} But He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know."

{33} Therefore the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought Him [anything] to eat?”

Jesus, however, is focused on meatier issues:

{34} Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work.

{35} Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and [then] comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!

{36} And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together.

{37} For in this the saying is true: ‘One sows and another reaps.’ {38} I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors.”

And reap they do:

{39} And many of the Samaritans of that city believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, “He told me all that I [ever] did.”

{40} So when the Samaritans had come to Him, they urged Him to stay with them; and He stayed there two days.

The harvest is so great not only because of the woman’s testimony but because of the Samaritans’ experience with Jesus:

{41} And many more believed because of His own word.

{42} Then they said to the woman, “Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard [Him] and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.”

Will those who we invite to meet Christ say the same?

Decision

Repentance: What false wells have you used to quench your inner thirst?

Action: Ask God to open your eyes this week to see His harvest.

Worship: Surrender your spirit to God’s Spirit, that you might worship Him with your whole heart.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Proverbs 3**. What can guide us in the right way?

Memory Verse: Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct[a] your paths. — Proverbs 3:5–6

C.11 Discerning Direction

In Which We Hear To Obey, and Obey To Hear

Memory Verse: Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct[a] your paths. — Proverbs 3:5–6

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 12. Guidance

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 12. Learning

Introduction

Few questions are fraught with more promise and peril for the believer than this: “What is God’s will for my life?”

While we may know the textbook answers to that question, we still long for more specific, personal guidance—and rightly so. Properly hearing God’s voice can open the door to dramatic transformation in people, relationships, and society. Alas, mishearing God’s voice can result in the darkest tragedy.

There is no simple answer to the question of God’s specific will for our lives, but there is a sure promise: if we entrust our ways to the Lord by faithfully pursuing the spiritual disciplines in submission to the Spirit, the Word, and the Body, He will ultimately lead us in a way that glorifies His name...

Devotion

Read **Acts 16**. How does Paul hear from God?

Bible

Proverbs 3

For this study, we will go back to the Old Testament for some Solomonic advice:

{3:1} My son, do not forget my law, but let your heart keep my commands...

Though the context is of a human father advising his son, it applies equally well to our heavenly Father. The first thing we need to remember when seeking God's will is to obey what He has already told us to do:

{2} For length of days and long life and peace they will add to you.

It is not enough to keep the letter of the Law; we must also devote ourselves to the highest ideals:

{3} Let not mercy and truth forsake you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart, {4} [and] so find favor and high esteem in the sight of God and man.

While everyone esteems mercy and truth in principle, it is not always comfortable to apply them in practice. Worse, from our human perspective, mercy and truth often seem at odds with one another. To fully embrace this teaching requires going beyond our mortal understanding:

{5} Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding...

Verse 5 may sound simple, but the principle is extremely difficult to consistently live out. Even if most of our heart trusts in the Lord, there is usually a small portion of it that views God as unfair, cruel, or unreliable. That part of our heart usually thinks it knows better than God what is good for us.

If we are to enjoy the full benefit of God's direction over of our lives, we need to give him everything:

{6} In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.

Acknowledging the Lord in all our ways requires a healthy fear of Him and an even healthier distaste for our own "wisdom":

{7} Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and depart from evil.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of godly wisdom but the end of human wisdom. This is the second important lesson for this week: if we want to know God's will, we need to realize that it is beyond anything our human mind can comprehend.

Accepting our human inadequacy can be scary to contemplate, but refreshing to experience:

{8} It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones.

There is no more reliable investment than that of relinquishing everything to the Lord:

{9} Honor the LORD with your possessions, and with the firstfruits of all your increase;
{10} so your barns will be filled with plenty, and your vats will overflow with new wine.

As with the rest of Proverbs, verse 9 is not a mechanical formula guaranteeing precise results. It is, however, a strong indicator of how God usually works: when we honor Him above all things, He delights in blessing us.

Conversely, when we are on the wrong path, God's love for us brings forth discipline:

{11} My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor detest His correction; {12}
For whom the LORD loves He corrects, Just as a father the son [in whom] he delights.

The end result of God's discipline is to help us learn His wisdom:

{13} Happy [is] the man [who] finds wisdom, and the man [who] gains understanding...

The payoff of godly wisdom exceeds anything this world can offer:

- {14} For her proceeds [are] better than the profits of silver, And her gain than fine gold.
{15} She [is] more precious than rubies, And all the things you may desire cannot compare with her.
{16} Length of days [is] in her right hand, In her left hand riches and honor.
{17} Her ways [are] ways of pleasantness, And all her paths [are] peace.
{18} She [is] a tree of life to those who take hold of her, And happy [are all] who retain her.

God has embedded His wisdom in the very fabric of the universe:

- {19} The LORD by wisdom founded the earth; By understanding He established the heavens; {20} By His knowledge the depths were broken up, And clouds drop down the dew.

Of course we know this intellectually. The challenge is to stay focused on the unseen because that is what is truly important:

- {21} My son, let them not depart from your eyes— Keep sound wisdom and discretion;
{22} So they will be life to your soul And grace to your neck.
{23} Then you will walk safely in your way, And your foot will not stumble.
{24} When you lie down, you will not be afraid; Yes, you will lie down and your sleep will be sweet.
{25} Do not be afraid of sudden terror, Nor of trouble from the wicked when it comes...

The unseen world points to the Holy One who is above and behind all things:

- {26} For the LORD will be your confidence, and will keep your foot from being caught.

Being aware of the spiritual realm does not mean we are to concern ourselves only with religious duties. In fact, the third precondition for knowing God's will is to act justly towards our fellow man:

- {27} Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in the power of your hand to do [so].
{28} Do not say to your neighbor, "Go, and come back, and tomorrow I will give [it]," when [you have] it with you.
{29} Do not devise evil against your neighbor, for he dwells by you for safety's sake.
{30} Do not strive with a man without cause, if he has done you no harm.
{31} Do not envy the oppressor, and choose none of his ways...

These commands sound obvious, but the temptation to do the opposite can be very subtle. All too often, we seek God's will only because we want things to turn out well for us. (cf. **James 4:3**). When our efforts appear sufficient to satisfy our desires, we are far less likely to ask God for His opinion.

The surest path to entering God's inner counsels involves cultivating the discipline of asking Him at all times what is on His heart and what we can be doing to advance His plans.

- {32} For the perverse [person is] an abomination to the LORD, but His secret counsel [is] with the upright.

{33} The curse of the LORD [is] on the house of the wicked, but He blesses the home of the just.

{34} Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.

{35} The wise shall inherit glory, but shame shall be the legacy of fools.

If we want to hear God's voice, we must learn to walk with the upright, the just, the humble and the wise. The road to holiness — being fully aligned with God's plan for our lives — is a narrow one. The way may sometimes seem dark, but light and life await us at the end.

Decision

Repentance: Where do you need to obey what God has already asked of you?

Action: Ask God how you can help fulfill His plan for someone else this week.

Worship: Reflect on the majesty of God's wisdom in ordering the universe.

For Next Week

For next week, read **Matthew 25**. How should we prepare for the Lord's return?

Memory Verse: Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. — Matthew 25:13

C.12 Joy in the Journey

In Which We Begin To Pursue the End...

Memory Verse: Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming. — Matthew 25:13

Assigned Reading

Richard Foster – **Celebration of Discipline**

Chapter 13. Celebration

Donald Whitney – **Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life**

Chapter 13. Perseverance

Introduction

This is the final lesson in our series, but it is hopefully just the beginning of your journey in understanding what it means to lead others—and yourself—into the holy name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

As we proceed to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling” (cf **Philippians 2:12**), it is essential to continually rejoice (cf. **Philippians 4:4**) because the “joy of the Lord is our strength” (cf. **Nehemiah 8:10**). We may occasionally become discouraged when we realize we will never reach perfection in our discipline, our character, or even our theology (cf. **1 Corinthians 13:9**). On the other hand, this means we will always have room for improvement!

This course has tried to cover the basics of Christian leadership, but there are even more wonderful truths about Christ to be understood, deeper works of the Holy Spirit to be experienced, and greater glories for the Father to be won.

May we persevere together in that pursuit until the day we are all finally united with our Beloved Bridegroom, to celebrate His holy name for all eternity.

Devotion

Read **Deuteronomy 34**. In the end, does Moses succeed or fail in what God calls Him to do?

Bible

Matthew 25

Our final study involves three sober parables of eternal significance, though it starts with an apparently festive occasion:

{25:1} “Then the kingdom of heaven shall be likened to ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom.

Verse 1 presumably refers to a marriage custom of the day, where the bride’s unmarried friends and relations carry lamps to illuminate the bridegroom’s approach:

{2} Now five of them were wise, and five were foolish. {3} Those who were foolish took their lamps and took no oil with them, {4} but the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.

As is common in traditional cultures, things often run behind schedule:

{5} But while the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. {6} And at midnight a cry was [heard]: ‘Behold, the bridegroom is coming; go out to meet him!’

The bridegroom’s delay leads to a last-minute frenzy:

{7} Then all those virgins arose and trimmed their lamps. {8} And the foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us [some] of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’ {9} But the wise answered, saying, ‘[No], lest there should not be enough for us and you; but go rather to those who sell, and buy for yourselves.’

Those not prepared are treated harshly:

{10} And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the wedding; and the door was shut.

{11} Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us!’ {12} But he answered and said, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, I do not know you.’

The bridegroom offers a shockingly severe response for such a minor act of negligence. Jesus surely chose such a dramatic picture deliberately. He wants to impress upon the disciples that they will have to wait much longer than they think for His return, and so they must prepare accordingly:

{13} Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming.

Moreover, He has something vital to tell us about how to occupy ourselves until He returns:

{14} For [the kingdom of heaven is] like a man traveling to a far country, [who] called his own servants and delivered his goods to them.

{15} And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.

This parable inspired the modern sense of the word talent, referring to a person’s God-given skills and abilities. Though the talents come from God, where they go depends on us:

{16} Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents.

{17} And likewise he who [had received] two gained two more also.

{18} But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money.

Like the servants in the story, we will be held accountable for what we do with our talents, even if there is a long delay in the Master’s return:

{19} After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

{20} So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, 'Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.' {21} His lord said to him, 'Well [done], good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

{22} He also who had received two talents came and said, 'Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.' {23} His lord said to him, 'Well [done], good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.'

Note the following:

Both servants earn as much as they are given.

They are called "good and faithful" for doing so.

They receive the same reward: to be responsible for much more.

Their reward relates to "the joy of their Lord."

What happens to the first two servants sharply contrasts with what happens to the third servant:

{24} Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.

{25} And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, [there] you have [what is] yours.'

Rather than using his talent, the third servant acts in three ways:

He criticizes the character of the lord.

He hides in fear.

He returns exactly what he was given.

The third servant's actions do not impress his lord:

{26} But his lord answered and said to him, 'You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.

{27} So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.

Intriguingly, the master does not so much deny the accusation of his being a "hard man" as he uses it to judge the servant's actions. The servant's own words show that he is not so much "afraid" as he is "wicked and lazy." In other words, the servant does not merely fear the master's strictness. Rather, he actively resents his master's lordship and does not want to make money for him.

The third servant ends up paying a steep price for his wicked and lazy behavior:

{28} So take the talent from him, and give [it] to him who has ten talents.

{29} 'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.

{30} And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Lest we miss the implications here, Jesus proceeds directly to a more personal story of judgment:

{31} When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory.

{32} All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides [his] sheep from the goats.

{33} And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left.

In verse 32, “nations” (ethnos) is synonymous with “Gentiles,” which is why some commentators interpret this verse as foretelling Christ’s judgment of those who have not heard of Jesus. Others view this verse as more of a parable than a prophecy. Regardless, Jesus’ words reveal something essential that He wants us to know about the nature of His holy kingdom:

{34} Then the King will say to those on His right hand, ‘Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

{35} for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; {36} I [was] naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.’

Importantly, the sheep do not seem to be consciously aware of how their virtuous acts impact Jesus:

{37} Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed [You], or thirsty and give [You] drink?

{38} When did we see You a stranger and take [You] in, or naked and clothe [You]?

{39} Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’

Apparently, they serve the needy without realizing they are serving Jesus:

{40} And the King will answer and say to them, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did [it] to one of the least of these My brethren, you did [it] to Me.’

In contrast to the sheep, the goats do not serve anyone but themselves:

{41} Then He will also say to those on the left hand, ‘Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: {42} for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; {43} I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.’

Like the sheep, the goats are ignorant of God’s presence in their interactions with others:

{44} Then they also will answer Him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?’

However, the goats do not act in compassion as the sheep do:

{45} Then He will answer them, saying, ‘Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do [it] to one of the least of these, you did not do [it] to Me.’

Thus, the goats experience a very different fate than that of the sheep:

{46} And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

This passage stands as the Scriptural counterpoint to the Book of Life from **Revelations 20**. On one level, it does not matter what we have done as long as our names are written with Jesus in

the Book of Life. In this passage, however, our eternal destiny appears intimately connected to our treatment of others.

What is the truth about our eternal destiny?

Different scholars reconcile the teachings of **Revelations 20** and **Matthew 25** in various ways. For our purposes, the most important fact is that Jesus teaches on both sides of the issue. If so, that must mean He wants us to keep both teachings in mind as we move forward in our Christian lives.

As important as it is to think properly about the holy name of God, thinking is not enough (cf **James 2:19**). Our hearts, souls, minds, and strength need to be baptized into every aspect of the holiness of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as our character is conformed step-by-step into His image through His gift of the spiritual disciplines.

As we do so, we will experience His love transforming the way we relate to our brothers, our sisters, our neighbors, and even our enemies. We will know the joy of saving our lives by losing them. We will see His life filling us as we die to our pride and sin. We will feel the exhilarating freedom of casting off the world's wisdom for God's seeming foolishness (cf. **1 Corinthians 1:25**), as we inherit the glory prepared for us since before time began. We will no longer strive to be perfect, but instead rest in the perfect peace of His holiness.

May you run with endurance the race that is set before you, until the day we all celebrate our final victory at the wedding feast of the Lamb. No eye has seen Him, but our hearts already know Him, and we look forward to His return with joy and longing.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Decision

Repentance: What talents have you been hiding that God wants you to use?

Action: How can you give back to God all He has given you?

Worship: Thank God for His revelations of Himself to you during this study.

For the Future

Graduation Verse: But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. — 2 Peter 3:18