

The Practice of Living Faithfully

Students Guide



**13 online adult Sunday school lessons for Christians
involved with God's redemptive efforts in the world**

Acacia Resources, a division of Baptist Center for Ethics
4219 Hillsboro Road, Suite 210
Nashville, Tennessee 37215
(615) 383-3192 phone
(615) 383-0915 fax
www.acaciaresources.com

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About Acacia Resources

The biblical witness singles out acacia wood for its uniqueness. The only wood mentioned in the building of the ark of the covenant, the tabernacle and the altar is acacia. Acacia wood is listed with other precious objects—gold, silver, fragrant incense, onyx stones—given to honor God.

Today's acacia tree is known for its value, diversity and durability. Some acacia trees have fragrant flowers used in making perfume. The seeds are edible. The bark is rich in tannin, a substance used in tanning, dyes, inks and pharmaceuticals. Furniture, oars, tools and gunstocks are made of the hard lumber from the acacia tree.

Some 1,200 species of acacia trees and shrubs exist throughout much of the world, including Africa, Australia and North America. The acacia species is tough enough to survive the semiarid regions of Africa where its roots sink deep to capture the rare water which runs quickly into the soil.

The name *acacia* symbolically ties BCE's publishing initiative to our biblical heritage. The acacia tree represents the wise value attached to educational resources, the diversity of needs within churches and the durability demanded for growing healthy Christians, whether they are singles, couples with children or senior adults.

Acacia Resources will guide Christians and draw them godward, as the ark of acacia wood guided the people of Israel in their journey and represented the presence of God in their midst.

For more information about Acacia Resources, call 615-383-3192 or visit our Web site at www.acaciaresources.com.

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A Leaders Guide for *The Practice of Living Faithfully* is also available from Acacia Resources (www.acaciaresources.com).

Preface

Practicing Our Faith: A Christian Way of Life

A young Arab girl in a mission school in Beirut asked a missionary, “Are you a Christian?” The missionary answered, “I love Jesus.” The girl sighed with relief, “Oh good. I was afraid you were one of those murdering Christians.”

What kind of Christians are we? How do we express our religious commitments? What are our primary faith practices?

Equally important, how do others see us? How do they interpret how we practice our faith?

In a casual conversation during a flight to the West Coast, a traveler acknowledged that he was raised a Catholic. He had gone to parochial school and attended a Jesuit university. But he confessed that he had not been to mass in years. He said he was Catholic, albeit a nonpracticing one.

A Baptist woman made a similar acknowledgment. Her once church-active family now occasionally went to church at Easter or Christmas. Years ago, she had sung in the choir and her husband had served on the finance committee. Their children attended Sunday school, participated in children’s choir and went to Vacation Bible School. As dual-career demands increased and the children’s schedules became more complicated, the family’s church involvement steadily declined to the point of minimal commitment.

Both the Catholic man and the Baptist woman identified themselves as members of faith communities. One admitted to a nonobservant practice of faith. The other disclosed a minimal commitment to faith.

Many people identify themselves as Christians, especially in Western European and American cultures, without demonstrating much evidence that the central teachings of the biblical witness and Gospel stories make a difference in their ordinary lives. Christianity often serves as a defining label; the same way Islam is used to define Iranians, or Hinduism is employed to explain Indians. These religious nomenclatures may describe a historic set of values for a particular people more than they describe a living faith that shapes daily life.

In the United States, public opinion polls repeatedly show that a vast majority of Americans believe in God, have faith in Jesus and hold the Bible in great reverence. Many say they pray regularly. However, popular values, market practices, government policies, entertainment programs and even church decisions are constant reminders that what we say we believe is disconnected from the way we behave. As sociological sonar soundings, these polls tell us about the state of American religiosity, not about the practice of real faith.

In workplaces, during Sunday school classes, on TV talk shows and in movies, a distinction is made between practicing and nonpracticing Christians.

More often than not, practicing Christians are identified as those who accept church teachings, regularly attend church on Sunday, financially support church programs and seek to follow biblical truths. Nonpracticing Christians are those who were raised in church but no longer go to church or those who confess an orthodox faith but no longer observe that confession.

This distinction between practicing and nonpracticing Christians is not meant as slur to nonpracticing Christians.

It is meant to shape and sharpen the understanding of practicing Christians about what it means to be Christian in a culture filled with God-talk.

The word *practice* has two intertwined meanings. One describes the performance of a *vocation*. We speak of physicians as those who practice medicine and attorneys as those who practice law. Both professions are generally noted for a high degree of proven competency. The idea of *practice* relates to the implementation of garnered skills and tested experience.

The other meaning of *practice* refers to *continuous learning exercises*. A Boy Scout learns to build a campfire, to pitch a tent and to tie knots through practice. Learning to shoot a jump shot comes from daily practice. Playing a violin results from countless hours of repetitive effort and weekly lessons. Driving a golf ball with accuracy takes time at the driving range, experience on the course and putting together the components of the swing.

“Practice makes perfect” is an American proverb that fits skill-based exercises and vocational activities.

As a Boy Scout learns to make a fire, Christians learn the practice of faith. As a physician practices the medical vocation, Christians live out their calling. We practice faith through repetitive exercises and vocational commitments. Practicing our faith will not make us perfect. It will help to define and to form who we are as Christ-followers.

The practice of being Christian centers on the way Christians form daily life in an increasingly complicated, fragmented culture. The touchstone question of the 21st century will be “Who are you and what do you do as Christian?” not “What do you believe?”

Many traditional Christians define faith as mental assent. For them, faith becomes cerebral. Faith is a matter of biblical and theological propositions. Faith finds expression in intellectual exercises like creeds and five-point Calvinism.

Such faith results in dualism. Belief is detached from behavior. Sunday worship is disconnected from weekday living. Thinking pious thoughts is made more important than living righteous living.

The emerging postmodern world yearns for a different way, for a Christianity of being and doing. Such a world calls for a new vision that will energetically and bravely focus on the practices of Christianity, contesting the old way that clings to the notion that dogma is the way, that cerebral assent is faith.

Ephesians 5:15-16 urges, “Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time.” If we are to live wisely in our time, we must readily “interpret the signs of the times” (Mt 16:3) and move quickly to “be doers of the word” (Jas 1:22).

In the early Christian church, belief did not simply mean what you thought with your mind and said with your tongue. Belief really meant what you gave your heart to. Belief was about the lifestyle of a shared community responsibility to and for one another. It was about daily living.

The practice of our faith is about a daily living rooted in the biblical witness that continuously shapes our lives and gives testimony to our heartfelt commitment to Jesus Christ. Being Christian together recovers and redefines matters such as offering hospitality, keeping Sabbath, speaking kindly, living simply and giving generously.

This undated curriculum for adults explores 13 practices that are central to the Christian identity. It recovers and renews the biblical concept that authentic faith is lived out through daily experiences. It underscores the truth that we learn the Christian way by *practicing* it.

The Practice of Living Faithfully will help those who study these lessons to be doers of the word!

Written by Robert M. Parham, executive director, Baptist Center for Ethics, Nashville, Tenn.

Being Transformed

Introduction

Admit it. Sometimes even the most optimistic among us is tempted to believe people seldom if ever change their core convictions and set behaviors. We may even feel this way about ourselves. The idea that any person can be transformed, be made by God into a new person, seems to run counter to experience.

When I find myself slipping into such a negative mindset, I think of Barbara.

Our lives intersected over the course of about two decades. Barbara was jovial, devoted to her family and a workhorse in her local church. Active in the choir, an outreach leader in her Sunday school class and virtually director-for-life of Vacation Bible School, Barbara seemed the model church member. I think she knew everyone in her rural village.

Well, almost everyone. Barbara did not know any of the African Americans who lived on the west side of town. She did not want to know them. This compassionate and devoted Christian woman believed African Americans were inferior to whites and that the two races should not mix in any way. In her wildest nightmares, Barbara could not conceive that God might see matters differently.

After many conversations on the subject, I became convinced there was almost no hope of a change in Barbara's perspective. Time passed. I resigned as pastor and left the community to attend seminary.

Nearly 15 years later, I returned to the same church as interim pastor. So much seemed unchanged. Barbara

remained the driving force behind most of the church's programs and ministries. My first inkling of what had changed came during Vacation Bible School when Barbara drove into the parking lot with a carload of African-American children. I later learned she had been instrumental in establishing a regular pattern of church visitation and ministry to African-American families and in leading the community to address racial issues in the local school.

What had happened? Barbara had experienced God-driven transformation of her mind and heart. In Barbara's case, the keys to transformation were her love for Jesus and her love for children.

As she once told me, "Those children got on my mind, and I couldn't get them out. Then I got to thinking that Jesus loved those children. I knew I loved Jesus. How could I not love the children he loved? That's what got all this started. I'm not the same woman I used to be."

Barbara's beliefs and actions had been transformed to conform more nearly to God's intent. Remembering her, I will never again allow myself to become cynical about the possibility of genuine transformation.

The Biblical Witness

What does the Bible have to say about transformation? Several passages provide insights.

Romans 12:1-2

¹I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may

discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Christians are often exhorted to give glory to God.

Paul insisted the primary means for bringing glory to God was through actions. Paul “appealed to” (NRSV) or “beseeched” (KJV) the Roman Christians to give careful attention to this matter.

Four phrases captured the breadth and urgency of his plea.

A living sacrifice. The language of sacrifice permeates the passage. Words such as “present,” “holy” and “acceptable” recall the Old Testament expectation that true worship involves giving one’s best to God.

Paul told his readers to offer their “bodies” as a worthy sacrifice to the God they knew in Jesus Christ. What did Paul mean by “bodies”? He meant every aspect and element of our lives.

We might paraphrase Paul as follows: “Make sure each thought, feeling and action is undertaken as a love offering to God.” Life as sacrificial worship of God is the foundation of the Christian lifestyle.

Do not be conformed to this world. Paul insisted Christians resist unthinking conformity to culture.

For many Roman Christians, this meant rejecting the temptation to blend devotion to Christ with the worship of other gods. The environment in which those Christians had been reared assumed a person could worship many gods, each of which would fulfill some need in the worshiper’s life. Christ’s exclusive claim on their loyalty was something new,

and they often fell back into old ways of thinking and acting. Paul understood their plight, and he told them bluntly that they were to struggle against unthinking acceptance of the everyday practices of Roman culture.

Be transformed. Paul did not have minor adjustments in mind. He urged the Roman Christians to be changed completely.

The Greek verb we translate as “transformed” is the same term used in Matthew and Luke to describe the transfiguration of Jesus. Paul called for a complete change of character and conduct. The verb tense in Greek indicates an ongoing action. In other words, our transformation is a process, not a onetime event.

Renewing of your minds. Paul envisioned transformation that entailed a renewal of the mind—by which Paul meant our very natures.

As our minds are renewed, we become better able to discern and act on how God would have us live.

Micah 6:8

He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

The people of Jerusalem in Micah’s time separated right worship of God from daily conduct. They believed God could be pleased solely by what they offered him during formal worship. Micah mocked their debates over what constituted the most acceptable ritual sacrifice: yearling calves, thousands of rams or perhaps even one’s first-born child.

God's demands were quite different. God expected his people to worship him through just dealings, loving others as God loves and an ongoing commitment to live life according to God's will.

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Pharisees had long debated if the numerous laws might be summarized in one commandment. While we sometimes assume the questioning Pharisee's goal was to entrap Jesus, the Pharisee may have been inviting Jesus to enter the discussion. When Jesus replied that love of God, self and neighbor was the foundation of the law and the prophets, he united right worship with right conduct. A genuine follower of Jesus, by implication, is required to do the same.

Ephesians 4:20-24

²⁰That is not the way you learned Christ! ²¹For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus. ²²You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, ²³and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Paul consistently taught that a Christian must put off the old nature and put on the new nature. The Christian's relationship with Christ both enabled and prompted such action. The apostle could not conceive of a genuine Christian remaining comfortably conformed to culture. Instead, produced both by the indwelling presence of Christ and an increasing knowledge of the teachings and life of Jesus, the Christian would choose a new kind of life. Increasing Christlikeness would be the result.

The biblical witness teaches us that God expects and enables Christians to disengage from casual cultural conformity. At the same time, God works with us to grow a new life or character—one that takes its cues from Jesus Christ. The ongoing process's goal is to turn us into people who actively love God, self and neighbor.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

How can we strengthen and accelerate the process of transformation in our own lives?

Be honest about conformity. As I write these words, I am facing a computer monitor while sitting in a chair in my office. I am dressed in business casual clothing. The air temperature is comfortable. Tonight I plan to watch the NCAA basketball championship game. I will probably pop a frozen pizza in the oven and eat more than I should.

What is my point? Most of us conform more easily and thoroughly to our culture than we realize. Sometimes we do so in relatively small ways, such as my favored attire. At other times, we mirror the darker side of our American culture. Examples might include racism, greed, class hatred, overconsumption and the acceptance of violence.

Discarding the old nature begins with identifying the ways we remain bound to the old nature. Being honest with ourselves and with God is essential.

Define Christian nonconformity. Paul enjoined us to be not conformed to the world. In other words, Christians are to be nonconformists. Our problem sometimes comes in defining what such nonconformity means. Jesus, Paul and the prophets provide essential parameters. Christian nonconformity involves developing the kind of character that increasingly loves God and others. Such love involves not only disposition but also loving actions.

Practice Christian nonconformity. Most of us will start small and in reaction to some aspect of our old natures. For example, we might intentionally choose not to purchase a sport utility vehicle because most of them unduly pollute the atmosphere and guzzle gasoline. Loving God and neighbor, we could choose to use public transport or own a more efficient vehicle in order to take better care of God's world and the planet we share with others.

As our new nature matures, we may become change agents in our broader society. I know a Christian businessman who recently founded a new organization called "Because It's Right." The purpose of the organization is to strengthen men and women in combating racism in daily life. People may join a chapter in the church, business or neighborhood. Each member pledges to confront, gently but clearly, racist comments and actions they encounter. The members of a chapter meet regularly to offer support to one another. They wear a special lapel pin that helps members of different chapters recognize one another when they are sitting in a board room, a PTO meeting or any other gathering.

Can you think of two or three ways in which you might begin now to practice Christian nonconformity?

Renew your mind. Developing a transformed life and manifesting that life through Christian nonconformity require a renewed mind or self. Such renewal begins with and is sustained by a right relationship with God. Private and corporate worship, prayer, serious study of the Scriptures with special attention to the life and ministry of Jesus, meaningful interaction with other Christians—all these actions open us to God's work of making us into new creatures. We cannot become new people on our own. We need God and one another.

Do you remember Barbara? When I think of her, I dare to believe in the possibility of God-driven transformation in my life and the lives of others. Do you?

Written by Mike Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Pursuing Discernment

Introduction

I have a friend with a problem. He is the senior minister in a Christian organization that employs about a dozen ministers. He and his colleagues carry out a wonderful ministry of witness and compassion. His organization is part of a much larger and wealthier organization that also carries out a fine ministry.

Here is my friend's problem: Being part of the big organization is a blessing, but it is also a nuisance. It is a blessing because the big organization gives his small ministry visibility and credibility in the community and because the large organization provides much of the funding for my friend's ministry. It is a nuisance because he and his colleagues must spend a large proportion of their time and energy relating to the larger organization rather than doing the ministry they believe God has called them to do.

There is one other complicating factor. The big organization is having financial difficulties, and it is possible, though not certain, that in the future it will not continue to provide financial support for my friend and his colleagues.

What should my friend and his colleagues do? Should they continue with things as they are? Should they sever relations with the larger organization? Should they restructure their relationship to the larger organization? A lot is at stake here. Every day, in the lives of about a dozen ministers, time and energy that could be used to help hurting people are spent on organizational busywork.

What my friend needs is what the Bible calls wisdom. Wisdom is a mastery of life and its difficulties. He needs to be able to discern the best course of action for himself, his colleagues and their ministry.

My friend is not alone. All of us need discernment and wisdom. Without discernment, we make poor choices and our lives are impoverished. With it, we make good choices and our lives are enriched.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness offers four principles related to discernment. Consider each principle.

Jeremiah 28:10-17

¹⁰Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it. ¹¹And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the LORD: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way. ¹²Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ¹³Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says the LORD: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! ¹⁴For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. ¹⁵And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, the LORD has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie. ¹⁶Therefore says the LORD: I am going to send you off the face of the earth.

Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against the LORD.”

Jeremiah and Hananiah were two prophets. Both claimed to be speaking for the Lord. Each said precisely the opposite of what the other was saying. Hananiah said that the Lord would not allow the nation of Israel to be defeated by its military foes. Jeremiah said the Lord would. How were the people supposed to decide which prophet was right?

Sound familiar? Turn on your television and watch a few religious shows. There is a good chance you will hear contradictory messages. The speakers may all be wrong, but they cannot all be right.

Here is our biblical principle: The people of God always have a need for wisdom and discernment to know how to live.

Notice that the emphasis is on the community, not on individuals. Of course, individuals need wisdom and discernment. But the Bible emphasizes that the entire community of God’s people needs these things.

Notice also that the need for wisdom and discernment is practical rather than theoretical.

Matthew 10:16

“See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

From time to time, Jesus talked to his disciples about their need for wisdom and discernment. On one occasion, as he sent them on a potentially difficult mission, he told them to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.”

That is our second biblical principle: God wants Christians to be wise, not naïve or arrogant.

Notice that this view is a middle way between two other views held by some Christians. Some sincere Christians think that piety requires that they never attempt to understand things or to think clearly or to have wisdom, but only to trust God to direct their lives. Some other Christians believe that Christians are on their own and may make their decisions without reference to God’s will. Between naiveté and arrogance lies the biblical principle that God wants Christians to be wise to understand how to live out God’s will in the world.

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Where are Christians to find the discernment and wisdom that God wants them to have? The answer is that wisdom is “from above” (also read James 1:5 and 3:17). God is the source of the wisdom and discernment we need.

How does God give wisdom? Paul answered that question in his letter to the church at Rome: “Be *transformed* by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2, emphasis added).

God gives wisdom by transforming us. The word Paul used for transform is the word from which we get our English word metamorphosis. Notice that here, once again, the emphasis is communal rather than private. The word *you* is plural. The church together receives discernment as God transforms the church.

We all know how God transforms the church; it is not a secret. God transforms the church as it lives out its *koinonia*, its common life, together. As the community meets together, worships God together, sings hymns and reads Scripture and prays together, engages in spiritual and moral conversation together and attempts to serve people in need, God brings about a slow, imperceptible, but very real transformation of the church.

The result is discernment. People who previously were unable to discern a wise course of action can now do so because they have been shaped by God as they participated in the Christian community.

This is our third biblical principle: God uses the church's life to transform the members so they become people of wisdom and discernment.

This teaching is difficult for many Americans. We want our needs to be met privately rather than communally and quickly rather than slowly.

Still, some things are worth the wait, and discernment is one of them. After all, there is no substitute for it, and we need it every day.

Paul's instruction "to think with sober judgment" (Rom 12:3) suggests that discernment is an alternative to self-deception. God wants all of us to grow into mature, discriminating adults who have the ability to eliminate self-deception from their own lives and to identify authenticity in the world around them.

1Thessalonians 5:21-22

²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.

Discernment is both an ability and an activity to be done again and again.

Paul told the Christians at Thessalonica, "test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil" (1 Thess 5:21-22). Paul believed that because the Spirit of God is with the church (1 Thess 5:19), the church is able to discern good and evil.

Here is the fourth principle: Christians should use God's gifts of wisdom and discernment to discriminate between good and evil and to embrace what is good.

This principle is important because we live in a technological age. We assume that knowledge is morally and spiritually neutral. An example is the Internet. Our knowledge of how to use the Internet is morally neutral. We may use it for good (for example, to communicate with a friend) or evil (for example, to disseminate hate about a politician).

In the first century, Christians were not interested in morally and spiritually neutral knowledge. Their interest was in a kind of wisdom that was not morally neutral. James expressed this fact directly: "The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy" (Jas 3:17).

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Here are four biblical principles about discernment.

- The people of God always have a need for wisdom and discernment to know how to live.

- God wants Christians to be wise, not naïve or arrogant.
- God uses the church's life to transform its members so that they become people of wisdom and discernment.
- Christians should use God's gifts of wisdom and discernment in order to discern between good and evil and to embrace what is good.

How can we apply these principles in our lives today? Let's consider them one at a time.

First, we can apply our need for wisdom and discernment. To live as Christians in the world, it is not enough to know how to be a good church member. To live as faithful Christians, we need wisdom and discernment.

Second, we can renounce the ways of naiveté and arrogance. We can accept that we are called to grow into mature adults. God does not want us to remain infants or even adolescents in our faith. We also can humbly accept that we do not know everything and are not free to choose whatever happens to please us.

Third, we can accept that by ourselves we will never become wise or discerning. We can acknowledge that it is only as we participate in the church's life of worship, conversation and service that God will transform us into people of wisdom and discernment. We can trust church life as if it really matters, because it does.

Fourth, we can use the gift of discernment to distinguish between good and evil and to embrace the good. When we embrace evil, we are not wise. We must release evil in

order to receive the wisdom that God gives us in the church.

A disciple asked one of the desert fathers, "Can I by prayer reach God?" The abba replied, "Can you by prayer make the sun rise?" The disciple then asked, "Then why do you teach us how to pray?" The abba said, "So you will be awake when the sun rises."

We cannot achieve discernment ourselves, but if we desire discernment and participate seriously in the life of the church, God will transform us into discerning people.

We can trust God to transform us, for, as Paul said to the church at Thessalonica, "He will do this" (1 Thess 5:24).

Written by Fisher Humphreys, professor of divinity, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University, Birmingham, Ala.

Practicing Hospitality

Introduction

The pastor sat quietly with her pastor-parish committee as they shared negative comments they had received from congregational members. She had taken into her home a battered woman from a neighboring town. The parsonage in which she lived was hers to do with as she pleased, the committee told her, unless it pleased her to take in someone from “a bad neighborhood” who had “real problems.”

The pastor nodded her understanding of their concerns. She had three choices:

She could promise never to do it again and therefore make everyone, but herself, happy. It was the easiest way out. She could deal with it internally, swallowing her disappointment and her feeling that she was being disobedient to what God had called her to do.

Hospitality is not a matter of a kind heart, but obedience to God. One response to strangers is to pretend the call to hospitality does not exist so nobody gets threatened or upset.

Another choice was to assure committee members that none of their fears would come true. No angry husband would come and harm her. The battered woman, a stranger, would not damage church property. But the pastor could not choose option two, because she knew from experience that in these situations an angry husband might show up and that there might be harm or damage.

There are risks to hospitality. One response to hospitality is to do nothing that involves a risk.

The third option was the only real one for the pastor. She took a deep breath and said, “I believe I am required by God to practice a radical hospitality. This means that as a Christian I am to give safe refuge when possible to anyone God sends to me. If I am hurt, then I am willing to take that risk. If church property is damaged, then I will pay for its replacement or repair.”

Hospitality has a way of spilling over on others. The outcome of her decision would involve many people. At its core, hospitality is communal not private. It is either supported or rejected by the community as a whole.

So, what is hospitality? Hospitality is being gracious to invited guests. Hospitality is entertainment. But what about guests that are not seeking entertainment, but refuge, protection and/or relief from physical needs?

Why would the pastor label her welcoming of the battered woman radical hospitality? Probably because it is not often we invite a stranger into our home—other than a visiting missionary or foreign exchange student. We are not used to having personal space shared with someone we do not know.

Hostels, hospitals and hotels have roots in the idea of hospitality and the church historically has been a refuge. Once the church was called on to house those who were fleeing from persecution. Laws still exist that make a church a refuge.

Church members, though, do not always make their church a refuge. Churches do not run ads that say, “Wanted: Tired, Sick, Poor, Homeless Persons, Especially Lepers and Other Outcasts.” Most churches have a discreet way of letting those persons know not to come.

Many churches have reached out to others through homeless shelters, soup kitchens and other social ministries. It is ironic that in many churches the people who are in need are welcome to come to the shelters and soup kitchens, but would not be welcomed in church services.

The difference between social ministry, which is needed and important, and hospitality is the attitude with which the stranger is greeted. Hospitality shares space, worldly goods and time with the stranger for the sake of the Lord. Social ministries often limit their sharing to worldly goods within strict confines such as the shelter or pantry that administers carefully, usually to be sure the clients have limited access to the church and congregation as a whole.

The Biblical Witness

Romans 12:13

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This passage labels hospitality as one outgrowth of a life transformed by the gospel, not conformed to the world.

Paul began this chapter calling the believers in Rome “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (v 1). He challenged them to be transformed by the “renewing of your minds” to discern the will of God (v 2).

Perhaps this is the key to hospitality. The practice of hospitality requires careful attention to the discernment of God’s will. Scripture does not give us a list of guidelines about what to do when confronted with the needs of strangers. In no place did Jesus ask for three forms of identification and

proof of income before he helped people. Jesus simply met needs.

After a warning against thinking too highly of ourselves and a plea to see the different gifts and functions of the body (vv 3-8), Paul listed the marks of a true Christian. One was to contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers (v 13).

Many churches provide funds only to church members or community members in need. That takes care of the first part of verse 13, but what about the strangers? Some churches have developed a system of vouchers to care for strangers without giving them money or a place to stay in the church. This is certainly one response to the command to extend hospitality.

For the Jews, hospitality meant more than arranging for shelter and food. Paul knew about the strict rules of hospitality:

- All sojourners and travelers were to be given shelter and treated as if they were citizens.
- Widows and orphans, those with no way to care for themselves, were to be cared for by the community with all the people doing their part.
- People in need were to be treated with dignity.
- Cities of refuge were set up for those who needed a home and could not return to their own.

Luke 11:5-13

⁵And he said to them, “Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, ‘Friend,

lend me three loaves of bread; ⁶for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before you.’ ⁷And he answers from within, ‘Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.’ ⁸I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs. ⁹So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. ¹¹Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jesus told the disciples about a man who went to a neighbor at midnight asking for food, because the man himself had an unexpected guest. The neighbor found his friend’s late night request annoying. Jesus said that even when hospitality was not done with joy, it was to be practiced.

Unlike the neighbor, God’s love and provision are done with joy. God promises if we knock, the way is opened; if we seek, we will find. What model do we want for hospitality? Are we annoyed by friends and forced into action to get rid of those who seek our shelter and aid? Are we the part of God’s joyous spirit that reaches out to embrace others?

God showed hospitality. In exile, Cain was protected. The Israelites were fed in the desert. Jesus showed hospitality in word and deed. He did not turn away anybody and welcomed those his society shunned. Even when betrayed

by Judas, Jesus handed him a piece of bread soaked in wine, the symbol of hospitality and friendship.

Perhaps the best example of God’s hospitality is in the coming, dying and rising of Christ. God opened wide the door to reconciliation for Gentile and Jew, Greek and Roman, men and women. God opened wide the door of forgiveness to all who sin and repent earnestly of such sin. There could be no better example of the hospitality of God than salvation itself.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Hospitality is daunting. How are we really to welcome others as we are welcomed by God?

Begin with yourself. Accept God’s hospitality. Are you glad to be you? Do you welcome yourself into your life? Or is your life constantly riddled with self-criticism and self-doubt?

Somehow we have communicated, perhaps since the Puritans, that to believe in God is to be self-deprecating. Ignoring who we are or hating who we are discounts that we are God’s own creation.

Extend this understanding of God’s creation to others. Who is on your list of strangers? Migrant workers, divorced fathers, poor people, unemployed persons, embittered senior adults, ADD children and AIDS patients? Are you on someone’s list of people needing hospitality?

Remember who really owns the world. Much of the reluctance to welcome people has to do with protecting property.

The pastor in the opening section was asked what she would do if the battered woman stole her new television. The pastor replied, “I don’t have a television. God has one that I am using. All I have comes from God, so you cannot steal from me.” The answer was greeted with a shaking of the head that said, “You are nuts.” The pastor is not nuts, but that example of being free from possessions is admittedly not an easy one to follow.

We must look again at who really owns what. How many churches are locked to keep vandals and thieves out? We are protecting God’s house and our own as if God were inadequate to protect them. None of us believes God is inadequate.

We may, though, be fearful of the lessons God might want to teach us.

Take it to church. We can make our worship services a place where everyone is welcome—not just people like us. “Welcome” carries with it a genuine pleasure to see the other person and an expectation of interaction that is meaningful.

Double check the heart. Pastors and deacons often hear, “Well, we’ve got to draw the line somewhere.” This may be talking about giving help from the deacon’s fund or letting children come to church in cutoff jeans. It might be about babies crying during worship and young parents who do not want to leave their children in the nursery. How do we decide when, where and who to help? Perhaps the most important Scripture on hospitality is the Golden Rule.

While he was imprisoned, Nelson Mandela practiced hospitality toward his captors. He shook their hands and called them “Mr.” He asked about their wives and children.

He treated his captors with dignity and welcomed a relationship with them, however limited. They responded by calling him Mr. Mandela and treating him with dignity, too. He said he simply treated them as he wished they would treat him.

The best of hospitality extends to others the courtesies and concern that we want others to extend to us.

Written by Ruth Fowler, former pastor, Community Baptist Church (ABC), Port Dickinson, NY.

Living Simply

Introduction

“Help! I’m drowning! I’ll never make it!” I felt like screaming. Moving out was not the bad part, thanks to hired packers. But in our new dwelling, with the rest of the family instantly immersed in school and work, I was left to make order out of chaos.

For days, boxes surrounded me. A vast ocean of stuff needed unpacking. I swore I would not move again for a very long time.

In the decade we had spent in our last home, people and things had multiplied. With twice as many in the family, we had at least twice as much to move. Our cabinets and drawers were overflowing. We had both a basement and attic, perfect for jamming with boxes of who-knew-what. Things had gotten out of control.

So I pledged to get rid of all unnecessary stuff before we moved. What we could not sell or give away, we threw out. Our load was significantly lightened. But we still had too much.

Studies, such as that by Princeton social scientist Robert Wuthnow, show that many Americans—about 84 percent—see materialism as a “serious social problem.”

Materialism, according to one definition in Webster’s Dictionary, is “a doctrine that the only or the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress.”

What is the problem with materialism—besides finding a place to put everything?

For starters, as our obsession with possessions grows we excuse our greed by saying that we are providing for our families. This hoarding behavior begs the questions: How much is enough—even for those we love? To whom are we really responsible—only those related to us?

Desire for money to buy our many things also drives an over-commitment to work. People are on the job longer and longer. We seek better-paying jobs that demand more time away from home or insist on two high-paying, high-pressure family incomes, trading precious, limited time for money to buy things.

As to our souls, if material success is the measure of a person, we will never be confident of our worth, for someone else will always have more. We will be drawn into the rat race of buying for our children so they can feel okay about themselves in comparison with their peers. This things-first philosophy is spiritually empty, resulting in perpetual dissatisfaction. There is no end to what we can desire, to the new products waved in front of us.

By contrast, the old Shaker hymn “Simple Gifts” speaks of a satisfaction that materialism could never bring.

“’Tis a gift to be simple
’tis a gift to be free;
’tis a gift to come down
Where we ought to be.”

Which comes first—simplicity or freedom? If we are free in Christ, we can live simply—not enslaved to culture, things, success. We can trust God that our identities and futures

are not determined by what we own. If we live simply, we can be free—free of the pressure to keep up with the neighbors, the stress of living beyond our means and the compulsion to choose work that will bring the most pay.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness speaks often about how we live with possessions.

Deuteronomy 8:11-19

¹¹Take care that you do not forget the LORD your God, by failing to keep his commandments, his ordinances, and his statutes, which I am commanding you today. ¹²When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them, ¹³and when your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied, ¹⁴then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, ¹⁵who led you through the great and terrible wilderness, an arid wasteland with poisonous snakes and scorpions. He made water flow for you from flint rock, ¹⁶and fed you in the wilderness with manna that your ancestors did not know, to humble you and to test you, and in the end to do you good. ¹⁷Do not say to yourself, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.” ¹⁸But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth, so that he may confirm his covenant that he swore to your ancestors, as he is doing today. ¹⁹If you do forget the LORD your God and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish.

Moses warned the Hebrew people not to forget the Lord in their prosperity by failing to keep his commandments. He

recognized it would be all too easy for the people to say to themselves, “My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth” (v 17). Moses said, “But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you power to get wealth” (v 18). To forget that and to disobey God meant death (v 19).

As Moses warned the Hebrews, we, too, need to remember God’s hand in our prosperity and our need to keep God’s commands.

If Jesus is our role model for dealing with possessions, watch out! Not only was he no accumulator of things, he encouraged his followers to live simply.

When Jesus sent his disciples on a mission, he told them to travel light. He said, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or a staff; for laborers deserve their food” (v. 10).

Luke 12:13-21

¹³Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.” ¹⁴But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?” ¹⁵And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ ¹⁸Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ ²⁰But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose

will they be?’²¹ So it is with those who store up treasure for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

In the parable of the rich fool, Jesus warned that life “does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (v 15). He told of a rich man who built bigger and bigger barns for his grain and goods. The man took no care for his soul and met God unprepared at death.

After telling his parable, Jesus instructed his disciples: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing” (vv 22-23).

Here Jesus’ teachings do not condemn possessions. Instead, he warns about making all of life a matter of possessing things.

On another occasion, a “certain ruler” asked Jesus, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus questioned him about his lifestyle. Upon hearing his answer, Jesus told him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

In another teaching, Jesus said to the crowd following him, “So therefore, none of you can become my disciples if you do not give up all your possessions” (Lk 14:33).

These are hard teachings for us. We are far more comfortable concluding that the command to the ruler was an individualized command. We tend to interpret the instruction to the crowd as applying to a specific people. Yet we are forced to ask whether these harsh requirements apply to us.

What do you think? What do they say to you about living simply?

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

The flow of modern American living is away from biblical simplicity. Assuming we do not aim to get ride of all our possessions, we can at least move toward a diminished trust in and pursuit of things. But to swim against that tide takes effort.

Such struggle is not new. Living simply has long been a Christian objective. The earliest Anabaptists simplified worship, removing icons and ornate fixtures from their church buildings. Early Quakers dressed plainly. The Puritans emphasized thrift and shunned waste. Today’s Amish live unadorned lives.

In her book, *Plain and Simple: A Woman’s Journey to the Amish*, Sue Bender states, “I couldn’t be Amish, and I don’t want to be Amish, but I had a chance to observe a way of life that nurtures contentment.” Bender said that the Amish taught her “something about the human costs when old values are cast aside, sacrificed for ‘success.’”

In contrast to Amish simplicity, we lead complicated and discontented lives as a result of racing after possessions. Yes, we want it all and want our children to do it all.

“Should the kids do two sports each this fall?” I asked my husband after the move. “No way! Are you crazy?” he responded. And he was right. We would have gone nuts.

I also asked our daughter about continuing with violin lessons, since her new school did not offer musical instrument instruction until the following year. Wisely she replied

that perhaps piano and a sport were enough, along with adjusting to a new place. She was right.

Our young son, for his part, frequently complained after seven hours of school. “Can’t we just stay home today?” he asked, when reminded of the rest of the day’s activities.

Here are some suggestions that may move us toward simplifying our lives and reducing the stress:

Stop, think, prioritize. Take control and decide what is important for you, rather than letting TV commercials or the neighbors dictate your priorities. Develop personal and family guidelines for the spending of money and time. Consider biblical instruction and the fact that the great majority of the world’s people have far less than we do.

Choose. Learn to say no, even to good things and activities. We do not need to have it all or do it all. Match choices with priorities, and consider alternatives. What else could I do with the money? How else could I spend my time? Each person will choose differently.

Purchase wisely. Reduce slavery to money by living below your means, spending less than you could on housing and other big-ticket items. On the other hand, sometimes we spend more, rather than buying junk that will quickly need replacing.

Stay lean. Buy less, aiming for what you really need and truly like. Unload what you do not use. A couple I know had a rule that for everything they bought to wear, they had to discard something else. The book *Living More with Less* offers suggestions for using less while considering the less fortunate.

Give money and time. By exercising generosity, we remember God as the source of our benefits. We are freed from slavery to our own interests.

Teach and learn from children. Resist the temptation to indulge children, buying them whatever you can “afford.” We can neither afford to shower them with stuff of fleeting worth, nor to withhold from them ourselves. Learn from children that things fail to satisfy. Simple, spontaneous fun with loved ones outdoes the latest trendy toy.

May we simplify our lives as we sense our inherent worth as God’s well-loved children. May we trust God with our futures and put people immeasurably ahead of the possessions and activities we choose.

Written by Karen Johnson Zurheide, executive director, The Fells, living in New London, NH.

Giving Gifts

Introduction

Let us start with two stories.

At the conclusion of a morning worship service, Christian after Christian walked to the front of the sanctuary and dropped a small card into an offering plate. By the time the service was over, most adults and many teenagers in the congregation had participated.

I know what you are thinking! The service, however, had nothing to do with pledging the church budget. Instead, it was about gift giving.

The altar call marked the conclusion of an emphasis on discovering one's spiritual gifts and offering them back to God in Christian service. People pledged to invest their particular gifts for one year in service areas of their choice.

The church staff assisted the gift-givers in fulfilling their commitments. We helped them connect with homebound church members, build a Habitat for Humanity house, teach and nurture children, provide personal care to homeless families, share the gospel, tutor those who could not read, minister to prisoners and use their gifts in many other ways.

The second story is more traditional.

During a major capital needs campaign in a church, a great deal of emphasis was placed on sacrificial giving. For many members, sacrificial giving meant reallocating their cable television budget to the church building program.

Sacrifice took on a new level of meaning, though, with two pledges.

The first came from a retired couple. They had minimal financial resources. Still, believing in the church's mission and grateful for how the church had blessed their lives, they determined to find a way to make a substantial gift. In the end, both took part-time jobs and pledged the resulting income.

Later a teenager turned in her pledge. The amount surprised the pastor, and he asked her about the matter. She had given all the money she had saved to buy her first automobile. Like the older couple, she was grateful to God, and she wanted to make a gift to express her gratitude.

Christian gift-giving is rooted in gratitude for God's grace. Such gratitude leads Christians to invest their spiritual gifts and resources in God's work.

The Biblical Witness

Gift-givers are highlighted throughout the Bible. Consider the following examples.

Romans 12:6-8

⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: ⁷prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁸ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁹the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

According to Paul, God initiates gift-giving. God gifts each member of the body of Christ.

Paul provided the Roman Christians with a brief list of such gifts: service, teaching, exhortations, giving, aid and mercy. God's gifts, Paul wrote, were not bestowed that we might hoard them or use them for individual advantage. They, instead, were to be used for the good of the "one body of Christ" (v 5). Paul urged the Roman Christians to employ vigorously whatever gift they received.

Paul's overarching injunction with regard to all spiritual gifts is simple yet challenging: Christians are gifted by God, the Gift-Giver, so that we, in turn, might become gift-givers.

2 Corinthians 8:8-15

⁸I do not say this as a command, but I am testing the genuineness of your love against the earnestness of others. ⁹For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. ¹⁰And in this matter I am giving my advice: it is appropriate for you who began last year not only to do something but even to desire to do something—¹¹now finish doing it, so that your eagerness may be matched by completing it according to your means. ¹²For if the eagerness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has—not according to what one does not have. ¹³I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between ¹⁴your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance. ¹⁵As it is written, "The one who had much did not have too much, and the one who had little did not have too little."

Paul led the Gentile churches to collect a relief offering for Christians in Jerusalem, perhaps to meet hunger needs in Palestine. In addition, Jews continued to make religious

pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Such pilgrims provided a steady stream of converts to Christianity. The church in Jerusalem attempted to provide food and shelter for the converts, which may have placed an almost intolerable strain on the community's finances. Whether because of famine or successful evangelism, the church in Jerusalem became known for its poverty.

Paul urged the Corinthian Christians to complete the offering they had begun to collect. He was not above reminding the relatively wealthy Corinthian church of how generously the poor churches of Macedonia had given to the offering (2 Cor 8:1-5). His core argument, though, was rooted in Christ's generosity.

In language that resembles Philippians 2:5-11, Paul reminded the Corinthians that Jesus had willingly become poor in order to make them rich. Obviously, Paul was not referring to economic status but to salvation. Those who followed Christ followed the way he had charted. In this case, Paul argued that the Corinthians ought to give generously because Christ had given generously. Gratitude for Jesus' sacrifice and imitation of the way of Jesus allowed for no other conclusion.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11,15

⁷If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. ⁸You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. ⁹Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, "The seventh year, the year of remission, is near," and therefore view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing; your neighbor might cry to the LORD against you, and you would incur

guilt. ¹⁰Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. ¹¹Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” ... ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.

Generosity’s history is long. The Israelites were commanded to cultivate concern for the poor among them. They were to show their concern by supporting the needy, even if such giving involved sacrifice. Every seventh year the Israelites were supposed to forgive any debt owed them by another Israelite. The Israelites were warned against begrudging or withholding a loan to a poor person because the seventh year was approaching and one might not be repaid (v 9).

Also, Hebrew slaves were released after six years of service (vv 12-15). Not only were such slaves to be freed, they were to be given provisions with which to start a new life.

Why was such generosity commanded? Verse 15 provides the answer: Those whom God has redeemed or set free are to play the same kind of role in others’ lives.

Acts 5:1-11

¹But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; ²with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. ³“Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back a part of the proceeds of the

land? ⁴While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!” ⁵Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. ⁶The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him. ⁷After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸Peter said to her, “Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price.” And she said, “Yes, that was the price.” ⁹Then Peter said to her, “How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.” ¹⁰Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

Many of us avoid the story of Ananias and Sapphira. To put it mildly, death seems an overly harsh punishment for the crime of lying about one’s giving. Their story, however, takes place in the context of a larger tale: the extraordinary unity of the emerging church, exemplified by Christians freely liquidating resources to provide for the needy among them. No one was required to do so, but many people, such as Barnabas, did.

Ananias and Sapphira, on the other hand, concocted a plot to deceive the church and gain honor for themselves. They sold a piece of property, gave a portion of the proceeds to the church and claimed to have given all. Peter’s assessment of their crime was startling: in lying to their fellow Christians, they actually had lied to God.

Regardless of our feelings about the story, it remains a stern warning against pretense and deception with regard to giving.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

How might we apply the biblical witness on gift-giving? Try answering the following questions to jump-start your thinking.

What are my gifts? We sometimes underestimate our giftedness, but the truth of the matter is that God has gifted each Christian for ministry. Numerous tests and inventories are available to help us discover our spiritual gifts. Christians who know us well often may be able to assist. Even when we confine ourselves to the question of financial giftedness, Christians in the United States must admit we are rich in comparison to the poor of the world. Once we discover our gifts, we are ready to move to the next question.

What will I do with my gifts? At our best, we give our gifts back to God by using them to serve God's purposes in the world. We do so out of gratitude to God and because we increasingly love others as God loves.

Two examples suggest the variety of ways in which Christians practice gift-giving.

A pastor recently received an unexpected visit from a faithful church member. The member explained he had been thinking a great deal about the gifts God had given him. Over the years, he had given his time and financial resources to support the church, but he felt God prompting him to take another step.

“God seems to have given me the ability to make money,” he said. “Now God seems to be breaking my heart. I find I notice people in need, and I want to help.”

The pastor and he agreed to establish a church fund designed to assist people whose needs exceeded those normally addressed by the church's benevolence ministry. The church member ensures the fund always has at least \$1,000 available for immediate use and supplements that amount in special cases.

In my own church, a member has invested his gifts of compassion and organization in Memphis Interfaith Hospitality Network. Each week the network churches provide housing, counseling, tutoring, daycare, and transportation to up to four homeless families. The families rotate among the churches, staying one week in each facility. The ministry enables families to stay together rather than be dispersed to separate shelters. Over time, most of the homeless find both jobs and housing. During a typical year, over 100 of our church members participate as volunteers in the ministry. Homeless families and church members have been blessed because one person decided to invest his gifts in this ministry.

Does my gift giving really make a difference? Both the Scriptures and experience affirm that we make an enormous difference for good when we give generously of our gifts to God's service.

In his book *Living Like Jesus*, Ron Sider tells the story of David Bussau and his “micro-loans” to the poor. Bussau grew up under difficult circumstances. At the orphanage where he lived until age 17, he became a Christian. Bussau discovered God had given him the gifts to be a successful businessman, and he became wealthy while still a young

adult. Along with his wife, he decided God wanted him to use his gifts not only to turn a profit but also to benefit the desperately poor. Eventually, he concluded the best way to assist the poor in developing countries was through micro-loans and business counseling.

Bussau and others eventually established an organization called Opportunity Network. The network makes small loans of up to \$200 to would-be entrepreneurs. From 1981 to 1993, Opportunity Network made 46,000 loans, most of which were repaid within a year.

The results have been remarkable. Many individuals and families assisted by the program have increased their annual income by 50 percent. Opportunity Network is openly Christian and has become a highly credible witness among the poor of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Giving our gifts back to God, using our gifts to serve God in his world, is the Christian practice. Have you started your pilgrimage?

Written by Mike Smith, pastor, First Baptist Church, Murfreesboro, Tenn.

Praying in Public

Introduction

A cartoon in a popular magazine featured a family entering a restaurant. The father leans over and whispers to the lead waiter to seat them in a corner because they say the blessing. A faint smile of recognition may cross your face as you recall dilemmas and decisions of your own.

Most Christians will not stay up nights worrying about this issue but have wondered on numerous occasions what was appropriate socially as well as spiritually. What is authentic? Some neglectfully forget about prayer in public places. Some intentionally do not pray in a public restaurant because they find it offensive or phony or even counterproductive. Perhaps some fail to pray in a public place because they do not want their colleagues to know of their religious commitments. Some associate prayer in public with religious fanatics who do more harm than good. Most of us retain the freedom to do whatever seems appropriate regarding public prayer rather than follow a rigid script foisted on us by others.

Our subject is important enough and so frequently encountered as to deserve reflection, dialogue and mutual respect. The concepts of freedom of the Spirit and the priesthood of every believer should be applied to public prayer.

Let us proceed with several takes on one of the stories Jesus told, bearing in mind that he prayed privately and prized petition in closeted spaces. Although he offered his disciples a corporate prayer, he was outspoken about ostentatious supplication.

The Biblical Witness

Luke 18:9-14

⁹He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: ¹⁰“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ ¹³But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ ¹⁴I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a superb model since it exemplifies public prayer, and demonstrates both religious haughtiness and stunning penitence.

This particular Pharisee—though not all Pharisees—was so good he could hardly stand it, intoxicated by a too-high opinion of himself. He prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people” (v 11).

He was the kind of religious person who could strut while sitting down. With a “religious” personality like a stop sign, he made public prayer an ego trip of self-congratulation. He engaged in proud prayer, a self-contradictory endeavor.

Matthew 6:1, 5-8

¹“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. ... ⁵“And whenever you pray, do not be

like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ⁶But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. ⁷“When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. ⁸Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

Jesus was a proponent and practitioner of prayer. Like a Hebrew prophet, he pronounced: Be on constant vigilance not to do your spiritual deeds before other people to be seen by them (Mt 6:1). Jesus noted that hypocrites—religious actors—prayed ostentatiously in public on street corners (v 5).

Jesus expended considerable spiritual energy warning candidly about the wrong use of prayer. It was customary for Jews to pause from whatever they were doing around 3 p.m. to offer prayer in conjunction with the evening sacrifices, and some individuals selected the most visible perches on wide streets where there would be numerous observers. Spiritual actions were on display as they are today by politicians who seek to use televised religious services to their advantage.

Certainly Jesus tracked sin to its lair in the human heart (Mt 5:28). He warned forthrightly against prayer that prances or manipulates rather than converses with God. Indeed, Jesus held a profound respect for private prayer (Mt 6:6). He often left the disciples and went to pray by himself (Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16).

Some manipulate other people by means of the religious practice of prayer. The pretense of prayer can be utilized as a political ploy, claiming to love while undercutting. Holy Joes and Joannas turn off some people with their adornments on cars and crass bumper stickers. Some prayers at football games are more public displays than true religion, and Christian prayers at civic clubs can be ambiguous when some members claim another religious tradition. A prayer at a civic club could pick up a theme found in both Testaments and be inclusive of the Judeo-Christian tradition at least. A civic club prayer could lead the entire assembly into a common experience by relating meaningfully to civic duty and to global concerns.

One wonders whether it is fair to non-Christian members if the prayers are always “in Jesus’ name.” We are dealing with the ambiguity of the marketplace in a postmodern world.

On the other hand, the tax collector in the parable of Luke 18 made contact with God in his public prayer. He was so bad he could hardly stand it, but his sincere prayer came like a telegram from his heart.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

In deciding about the practice of prayer, the individual conscience before God takes on great importance. In real life you may decide intuitively whether to pray in public, given the intuitive sense of the immediate leadership of the Holy Spirit.

Some people reject grace at meals, even though attested in the Bible, because it can become a thoughtless habit. Often our prayers at the table are glib. Sometimes, to abstain from saying grace for a month may be redemptive.

Prayer at Home. Modern lifestyle plays havoc with family or individual grace. Breakfast may not exist as a sit-down event, lunch may find the family scattered over the city and dinner may be served on TV tables in the den. Yet, family identity and Christian meaning can be defining in no small measure by significant grace at the table, sparking the possibility that someone can mute the TV sound with the remote or insist on a sit-down family dinner replete with conversation.

A troubling reality in our era of wall-to-wall work and crowded schedules is the casualty of meals at home. Women and men are cooking less, working more, and eating out. This raises the prayer in a restaurant thing more sharply, giving it another facet. If we do not have breakfast or lunch with our spouse, perish the thought (!) but face reality, then do we have a prayer together once a day even if it is in a café or cafeteria?

Prayer at the Hospital. Often family and friends gather intently in a waiting room as a loved one goes through bypass surgery or neurological surgery in a nearby operating room. The seriously ill patient may be in the recovery room or intensive care unit. Everyone is anxious. Other people unrelated are scattered around the room engrossed in their own concerns. Do you have a prayer involving family? Most of us would say yes, possibly recalling a meaningful moment shot through with anxiety when a family gathered around, held hands, and someone lead a quiet but audible prayer.

Wayne Oates suggests the appropriateness of holding the patient’s hand and in effect saying a prayer without calling it that or closing eyes. Open-eyed prayers can be potent and socially sensitive. We do have options.

Prayer at Restaurants. Prayer in a public restaurant will remain a personal call unacceptable to some who may elect to pray privately on the way to or from the restaurant. Others will choose to pray in public.

In a restaurant, a number of potential alternatives are available, if one is so inclined. One possibility is open-eyed as someone expresses thanks for everyone freely and naturally, or an open-eyed individual prays privately and silently.

My personal tradition since college days involves silent prayer with eyes closed, sometimes explaining to others who often choose to do the same. Another option, sometimes quite natural, involves bowed heads, closed eyes with someone in the circle voicing a quiet prayer for all.

Some who notice a table with bowed heads will interpret such public prayers at restaurants as a little much or a display while others will be positively impacted. It could be subjectively that the kind of impression that the prayers in a restaurant make before and after the blessing influence the private reaction of others in the restaurant who caught the prayer out of the corner of their eyes.

Several ministers were invited to a beautiful country club after a Fred Craddock lecture at McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University. Their “cups” were already full, but they still had an appetite. They sat in magnificent surroundings. Through the windows the flowing lawn of the golf course and a lovely lake could be seen. Important, recognizable business people and other leading citizens were scattered around the well-appointed room, some negotiating over lunch. What, if anything, would be done about a blessing? The host, the lone layman at the table, suggested quite genuinely that there be a grace, and he himself led a

beautiful prayer from the heart. Perhaps, he sensed the immediate leadership of the Spirit of God. It seemed so.

What should be the content of a prayer at a restaurant? It is imperative that it be conversation with God. Sincere thanksgiving for daily bread, conceivably for the others present, possibly a sentiment for those serving in the restaurant are possibilities. It could be as simple as a sentence.

Christians live in inescapable polarity: They must make of public prayer actual conversation with God and not pray for display or applause.

The ball is in your court. What do you think? Do you desire to alter your practice of public prayer or consider a variety of options, perhaps not doing any one thing all the time?

Written by Peter Rhea Jones, professor of preaching and New Testament, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Ga.

Fasting

Introduction

Wait—do not skip this lesson!

Even though the literature is undated and you may be tempted to skip around, trust the editors. Even though fasting may be the last thing you want to study or teach, remember that it is a biblical practice.

One major obstacle to a well-rounded faith is a well-rounded body. Many of us are so deeply conditioned by the American ideal of three square meals that anything less seems a cultural heresy. The result, for many of us, is that we are so overweight that any discussion of fasting feels like hypocrisy.

I remember discovering Richard Foster's work some years ago. I was so impressed with *Celebration of Discipline* that I used it as the basis for a series of sermons and studies in the young mission church I served as pastor. When I got to the section on the inward discipline of fasting, I skipped it.

Why? Partly because fasting seems so alien to our culture that I worried about being labeled a crackpot. Mostly, however, because I was fifty pounds overweight. I could not reconcile the image of a fat guy proclaiming the virtues of fasting knowing it would be obvious to all that I did not practice what I preached.

Another reason many people have an aversion to fasting is that some well-known persons have uprooted the practice from its original spiritual context, distorting it and using it as a political weapon for social change.

Mahatma Gandhi rose to prominence on the tide of lengthy hunger strikes designed to turn public sentiment against British imperialism in India. Gandhi is remembered as a heroic pioneer, but a painfully skinny one. During America's civil rights movement in the '60s, comedian-turned-activist Dick Gregory periodically fasted to promote awareness of racial or economic injustice. More recently, Jack Kevorkian (known as "Dr. Death" for his participation in assisted suicides) threatened a hunger strike if convicted of murder for causing the death of a pain-wracked patient who wished to die.

Such practices have little in common with the biblical practice of fasting.

The Biblical Witness

Both public and private fasting are mentioned in Scripture, always as a spiritual discipline designed to prepare the believer's heart for deeper fellowship and relationship with God.

Fasting was sometimes a reactive sign of personal mourning (2 Sam 12:15-23) or penitence (1 Kings 21:27; Ps 69:1-15). Public fasts were called to express sorrow for Israel's corporate sin (Neh 1:4-11; Jer 36:9; Joel 1:8-2:17).

Fasting could also be practiced as a proactive means for seeking God's help in times of stress or need (Ps 35:13-14). King Jehoshaphat called for a public fast when Israel was threatened by war (2 Chr 20:3). Ezra insisted that the returning exiles should fast in prayer for a safe journey (Ezra 8:21-23). Queen Esther fasted and enlisted others to fast with her during a three-day period of preparation for a risky meeting with King Ahasuerus (Esth 4:15-17).

In the New Testament, leaders of the church in Antioch were engaged in fasting and praying when they sensed the Holy Spirit leading them to set apart Barnabas and Saul for a special calling. After further fasting and prayer to confirm their initial impressions, the church leaders laid hands on the two and sent them on mission (Acts 13:1-3; compare Acts 14:23). After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness and spent 40 days in personal fasting and prayer as he prepared to inaugurate the public phase of his ministry (Mt 4:2).

These narrative examples portray fasting as a commonly known and spiritually profitable practice. The few biblical instructions about fasting are mostly concerned with preventing distortions of its purpose and practice.

Matthew 6:16-18

¹⁶“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. ¹⁷But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, ¹⁸so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Jesus seems to have assumed that his followers would fast and taught them to fast appropriately.

Fasting, like prayer (Mt 6:5-6), is not designed as a public demonstration but as a personal discipline. Fasting is between the believer and God. The Pharisees boasted that they fasted twice weekly (Lk 18:12), although the law required fasting only once a year on the day of atonement (Lev 16:31-34).

Fasting is a means to an end—not a mystical end in itself.

Isaiah 58:6-7

⁶Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? ⁷Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?”

Isaiah’s teaching implied that true fasting motivated God’s people to greater obedience as seen in the practice of promoting social justice and caring for the poor.

To summarize, in biblical thought fasting serves to draw believers closer to God and to motivate meaningful ministry toward others. This would suggest that God finds little pleasure in ascetic isolation, but God is pleased with spiritual self-discipline that leads to community.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

When I was 19, fresh in faith and filled with ideals, I often led student teams on weekend youth retreats or revivals through the “Impact Team” program of the Baptist Student Union at the University of Georgia. I often challenged my team to fast from Thursday afternoon until our evening meal on Friday, when we were usually on site. We used the unaccustomed hunger pangs to focus our minds on God and what God would have us do during those weekend efforts.

To this day, after 26 years as a pastor, I have not experienced such revival of heart and life as we saw during those weekend encounters.

Is periodic fasting a life option that Christians should consider? Absolutely. The excessive asceticism of some early

Christians should not turn us off to the practice—nor should the excessive consumerism of contemporary society.

Realistically, there are obstacles to overcome. It is easier for a single college student to skip a few consecutive meals, for example, than for someone whose spouse, children or coworkers will think it strange. Peer pressure is not limited to teenagers.

Remember that fasting's primary purpose is to aid in focusing one's life on God. For such a purpose, fasting may take many forms. One might fast during daylight hours, but eat each evening. A spiritually focused fast may last as little as one day or as long as 40 days, but should rarely exceed three days (Foster's *Celebration of Discipline* has helpful guidelines for planning and observing a fast).

There are other ways to employ and benefit from the same principles involved in fasting, but in a different fashion. For example, the season of Lent is a time of penitence and spiritual reflection when Christians give up a favorite food or habit for 40 days prior to Easter.

For someone who customarily eats two or three helpings at a sitting, choosing to limit oneself to one helping is a step in the right direction. The resulting change in one's sense of alimentary gratification serves as a constant reminder of one's need for spiritual satisfaction.

Many contemporary Christians have benefited from study/support group programs such as "First Place" and "Weigh Down." These programs encourage participants to focus on putting God first and to recognize when our obsession with food becomes idolatrous. These programs begin by promoting a closer walk with God and result in better health, often accompanied by significant weight loss.

The spirit of fasting can also be practiced with no involvement of food. In *Celebrating the Disciplines*, Richard Foster and Kathryn A. Yanni suggest one might consider "fasting" from the entertainment media or from passing judgment on oneself and others. The key is that the activity be something enjoyable that is an accustomed part of life, so that its absence will be missed.

Through focused self-denial, the absence of something loved constantly reminds the believer of a greater love that goes deeper than the surface pleasures we often substitute for meaningful fellowship with God. That greater love has the power to meeting our deepest needs, but only to the extent that we make room for it and are willing to receive it.

Physical fullness can be an effective mask for spiritual hunger. A short-term experiment in forsaking fast food for fasting could be the first step toward a more balanced life and a renewed relationship with the one who called himself the Bread of Life.

Written by Tony Cartledge, editor, The Biblical Recorder, Raleigh, N.C.

Honoring Sabbath

Introduction

Most Americans take for granted shopping, dining out or attending entertainment events on Sunday.

These opportunities have not always existed for most of our citizens. During colonial days, as well as in the earlier part of this century, “blue laws” were instituted that prevented such “worldly” pastimes on Sunday.

American blue laws were based on the biblical commandment of sabbath keeping and society’s effort to obey the Bible. By and large, blue laws were one way that earlier Christians practiced their faith. Such laws prohibited the sale of certain items on Sunday and closed some businesses. Civil government was used to advance a moral agenda of a religious majority at the expense of those without religious views or with views that were in the minority.

Perhaps the earliest blue law was this 1610 Virginia ordinance requiring the observance of the sabbath under penalty of whipping or even death: “Every man and woman shall repair in the morning to the divine service and sermons preached upon the Sabbath day, and in the afternoon to the divine service, and catechising, upon pain for the first fault to lose their provision and the allowance for the whole week following; for the second, to lose the said allowance and also to be whipt; and for the third to suffer death.”

Things have changed considerably since that law!

Today we live in a pluralistic culture with many competing religious ideas. While some stores, restaurants and businesses remain closed on Sunday, most counties have abandoned the blue laws. Nevertheless, the biblical witness calls for believers to keep the sabbath.

So, what does it mean to keep the sabbath? What did Jesus mean when he said, “the sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the sabbath” (Mk 2:27)? Why is keeping the sabbath important for busy Christians in the 21st century?

The Biblical Witness

Exodus 20:8-11

⁸Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹Six days you shall labor and do all your work. ¹⁰But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. ¹¹For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments instructs us to keep the sabbath holy (v 8). The word *holy* means to make separate. The sabbath was set apart as were certain objects in the temple.

The Commandment addressed how this sabbath day is to be set apart from the others. On the other six days of the week, we are free to work. But on the sabbath, we must refrain from work (literally occupation or business). The word translated as labor in this passage may also be

translated by the words employment or work for another. Thus, on the sabbath, we are to leave our employment and occupation and devote the day to rest and regeneration.

It is important to note that the Commandment to rest is not reserved for the wage earner alone, but includes all those within his or her charge such as our spouse, children, servants or guests.

The Fourth Commandment concludes with an example. God's work during the week of creation is provided to illustrate the importance of the sabbath. Busy with creation the first six days, God steps aside, declares the goodness of creation and rests on the seventh day.

In Genesis 2:3, God "blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation." Was God tired? Did God "need" to rest? Instead of thinking in those terms, understand that God was giving humankind an example to follow.

Exodus 24:12-18

¹²The LORD said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction."¹³So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them."¹⁵Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring

fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

The picture of God here as high and above all of the people is not to be missed. He was inaccessible to all but Moses and surrounded by the cloud. On the sabbath, Moses was summoned to penetrate the cloud and interact with God. Sabbath, here, involved a time to worship God.

Moses' interaction with God on the mountain was transformative. When Moses returned, his face was so radiant that he had to wear a veil (Ex 34:29-35).

Experiencing God on the sabbath will transform us. The regular experience of worshipping God restores the soul.

Mark 2:23-27

²³One sabbath he was going through the grainfields; and as they made their way his disciples began to pluck heads of grain. ²⁴The Pharisees said to him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" ²⁵And he said to them, "Have you never read what David did when he and his companions were hungry and in need of food? ²⁶He entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and he gave some to his companions."²⁷Then he said to them, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; ²⁸so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath."

In the New Testament, we see Jesus at odds with the religious leaders of his day over the observance of the sabbath.

From the perspective of the Pharisees, Jesus' disciples violated the sabbath's restriction against work. By plucking the heads of the grain, the disciples were harvesting. By separating the wheat from the chaff, they were winnowing. In either case, it was work, according to a literal interpretation of the Fourth Commandment. The religious leaders placed greater value on the law than on real-life needs. Jesus responded to the Pharisees by saying, "the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath."

It is clear from this passage, as well as companion passages in the other Gospels, that works related to human needs are permissible on the sabbath.

Jesus said, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the sabbath" (Mt 12:11-12).

In Mark 3:4 and Luke 6:9, we read that healing or doing good for others is permissible on the sabbath. Services by priests are also appropriate (Mt 12:5), as are necessities such as watering livestock (Lk 13:15).

The sabbath is made for humankind. We need it. We are finite beings with limits on our endurance. Not only do our bodies need the refreshment that the sabbath brings, but our minds and spirits need the time to be nourished and rejuvenated. The biblical witness suggests a three-fold purpose for sabbath—to provide humankind with opportunities for rest, worship and compassion.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

How does the Fourth Commandment to honor the sabbath apply to 21st century believers? In what ways are rest, worship and deeds of compassion vital for overworked, overstressed Christians in our culture?

Sabbath as a Countercultural Idea. To make a commitment to rest, worship and be involved in compassion on a weekly basis stands in stark contrast to the materialism and workaholicism of today's culture. The relentless push for more robs us of the time and ability to enjoy what we already have.

Honoring the sabbath is a small step toward ensuring that our families will live rather than exist.

As we observe weekly a day of rest, we will be better able to function mentally and spiritually the rest of the week. The Scripture suggests that those who honor the sabbath will be blessed (Isa 58:13-14). For the overworked, overstressed and overprogrammed Christian, an opportunity for rest, fellowship with God and meeting human needs may be its own reward.

Sabbath as a Symbol of Our Faith. Is it possible that observing the sabbath is a sign of our faith?

Some guests in our church commented that they came to church because of their neighbor. Sunday after Sunday, they observed their neighbor leaving for our church at 9:15 a.m. The accumulated testimony of this habit spoke to the guests about the need in their own lives to get reconnected with God and a family of faith.

Regularly keeping the sabbath in terms of worship may well be an identifying sign of our faith. We see in Exodus 31:16-18 and Ezekiel 20:12, 20 the suggestion that keeping the sabbath is a mark of our identity as the people of God. The fact that your newspaper is not sitting on your driveway on Sunday at 11:00 a.m. may be more of a testimony than you have known.

Sabbath as a Rhythm of Life. The biblical witness offers us a glimpse of the rhythm of life. It involves the ebb and flow of work and rest, involvement and reflection.

This rhythm is seen weekly in terms of the sabbath. It is seen yearly in terms of various religious festivals. Jesus reminds his followers that we must take time to “consider the lilies of the field” (Mt 6:25-34). Jesus demonstrates in his own life a balance of work and times of retreat from the obligations of the moment.

This principle of sabbath can be applied to a lifetime as well as a week. One can see the rhythm of life in God’s command to the Israelites about to enter the Promised Land. They were instructed not to till their land and vineyards in the seventh and fiftieth years (Lev 25). As we spend six decades in preparing for work or working, it is appropriate to spend a retirement (a life-sabbath), to rest, worship and involve ourselves in deeds of compassion. This life-sabbath affords the believer with a unique opportunity to take the next step in our spiritual journey.

Sabbath as a Principle of the Thing. As we consider how to apply the biblical witness to honor the sabbath, we must not lose sight of principle.

Paul encouraged the Colossians not to get caught up in legalism of the sabbath (Col 2:16). We must keep the main thing the main thing.

Honoring the sabbath is more about the practice itself than the actual day. Honoring God’s pattern is neither a call to asceticism nor a demand for religious excess. It is a practical recognition of our limits, an establishment of priorities in our lives and a recognition of God as the giver of life.

Written by Jeffrey Warren Scott, pastor, Colonial Avenue Baptist Church, Roanoke, Va.

Speaking Kindly

Introduction

What is the sound of kindness?

A voice from the audience passionately asks, “What can we do to help?” A caring employee steers the conversation elsewhere when coworkers begin to gossip. A husband responds to his wife’s hurtful remarks with words of concern and empathy.

We know kindness when we hear it. In our culture, kindness usually stands out like a foreign language.

When we surf radio, television and the Web, we understand that language has deteriorated rapidly since the days when Rhett Butler’s goodbye to Scarlett O’Hara was almost censored.

Our culture popularizes talk shows where speech leads to fistfights. We promote programs with lines like, “Here the latest dirt on . . .” Those who claim the moral and spiritual high ground slander their opponents in hateful tones.

Choosing to speak kindly these days means swimming against the current.

What language do you speak? If a video camera recorded everything you said yesterday, what would you learn from watching the tape? How might your words surprise you? What would they tell you about what you value? How would your speech change if you knew your church group would view the tape? Would you say more or less if you could relive yesterday conscious of all you uttered? Would you

keep more thoughts to yourself or offer more words of encouragement?

The way we speak and the faith we claim are so entwined that the Bible frequently addresses the subject of our speech. Those who narrow the issue of what Christians should or should not say to a discussion about whether particular words are acceptable or not miss the important message of the biblical texts.

There is more to speaking kindly than choosing sacred words over secular ones. Religious vocabulary itself can become empty. Consider how the acronym “WWJD?” (“What would Jesus do?”) has become such a fashion statement in schools that youth wear the letters without understanding the question.

In this new millennium, some people question whether certain words of faith, including the word “Christian,” have become so politicized that they no longer communicate eternal truths. Do we need a new language for our faith, or do we just need to speak the words we have in a different way?

Kathleen Norris, a poet, returned to church after 20 years away from it. Her greatest struggle was with the language of Christianity. In her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, she recorded her journey through language to faith. Norris wrote, “When God-talk is speech that is not of this world, it is a false language. In a religion that celebrates the Incarnation—the joining together of the human and the divine—a spiritualized jargon that does not ground itself in the five senses should be anathema.”

By speaking kindly, we practice our faith. We attempt to connect the compassion and care we find in Christ with the

real needs and concerns we find in our relationships. Words of kindness might address physical and emotional distress. They affirm the gift of everyday experiences we often overlook.

When we speak kindly we offer a kind of prayer to God through our words to others, sometimes a prayer of praise and other times a petition.

The Biblical Witness

James 3:2-10

²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

Learning to speak a language fluently requires discipline, careful attention to detail and consistent practice.

James said the tongue requires constant supervision and self-control in order to speak kindly and accomplish the good for which it is capable. Like the bit of a horse or the rudder of a ship, the tongue, despite its size, achieves great results when used correctly. Equally clear, however, the tongue without spiritual discipline is a powerful force for destruction. Like a fire out of control, the tongue causes tremendous ruin.

This image of fire strengthens the idea that bombarding society with cheap, unimaginative and unkind talk creates a cultural wasteland. J. B. Phillips translates these verses, “The tongue can make the whole of life a blazing hell.” The word used for hell (gehenna) refers to a deep valley outside Jerusalem where fire constantly burned to dispose of the city’s trash. When controlled, the tongue is an instrument of faith, enabling a person to praise the Creator. But it is also capable of polluting the personality, creating a depraved culture and becoming an instrument of evil.

Matthew 12:34-37

³⁴You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. ³⁵The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. ³⁶I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; ³⁷for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.

Jesus reserved his harshest criticism for those who spoke in the religious language of the day, the Pharisees. Jesus said that our ability to speak good things reflected what is inside our hearts. Our language and our faith are inseparable.

Prior to this passage, Jesus had healed the demoniac and restored his speech and sight. The Pharisees accused Jesus of receiving his power to do this from Satan. Jesus warned that they would be judged for every “careless” word and called them a “brood of vipers” (v 34). The poison of their words demonstrated they were spiritually blind to the work of God.

In the James 3 passage, the image of the serpent is also used. As the serpent holds poison in a small pocket under the mouth, so the tongue is charged with the venom of hate.

Jesus said good and evil are found in the hearts from which the words come. The charge the Pharisees made could only come from evil hearts. By judging Jesus, they judged themselves. Habitual words and speech patterns reveal the nature of a person, disclosing thoughts, feelings and values.

In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul wrote that without love, the ability to speak well is nothing more than noise. He indicated that maturity of faith includes maturity of speech.

Growing up into Christ affects our language. Ephesians 4:15 continues the idea that through speaking the truth in love we mature in our faith and grow in Christ. This higher purpose of our life in Christ guides our speaking.

Paul encouraged speech that will be useful for building up the body of Christ.

The biblical witness does not gloss over the challenges of learning to speak kindly. In the days of the early church, such speech was as challenging as it is in our time. Acts 15:1-21 describes the deep disagreement of the Jerusalem Council. Acts 15:36-41 tells of the argument between Paul and Barnabas that led them to part company.

Speaking kindly does not necessarily ignore differences, but it approaches them with the higher purpose of love in mind.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

So how do we learn to speak kindly?

Recognize the connection between faith and words.

Henri Nouwen took a sabbatical to get away from a hectic schedule at Yale University. On the second day at the monastery, some students asked him to lead a retreat for them. He approached his abbot, explaining that the five meditations they asked for would create too much work for him. He said he did not want to do it. The abbot told him he must. He protested, “Why should I spend my sabbatical time preparing all those things?”

“Prepare?” the abbot replied. “You’ve been a Christian for 40 years and a priest for 20, and a few students want to have a retreat. Why do you have to prepare? What those boys and girls want is to be a part of your life in God for a few days. If you pray half an hour in the morning, sing in our choir for an hour and do your spiritual reading, you will have so much to say you could give ten retreats.”

Nouwen concluded, “The question, you see, is not to prepare but to live in a state of ongoing preparedness so that, when someone who is drowning in the world comes into your world, you are ready to reach out and help.”

Careful attention to our faith journey will give us the words we need.

Try seeing people the way God sees them.

In his book *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, Richard Mouw gave a necessary rule of thumb for speaking kindly: “Concentrate on your own sinfulness and on the other person’s humanness. We become more civil by gaining a more honest picture of ourselves and others.... Civility runs deeper than words. It’s grounded in the way we view reality. This means that we Christians must work to view things—as far as possible for mere mortals—the way God does.”

Humility and an openness to learn complement kindness and help us practice it.

Recognize the presence of God when speaking.

Mouw wrote about a trip to Haiti where he found himself in a car singing church songs with missionary children, two of whom had been adopted when left on the missionaries’ doorstep. When they began the song, “O be careful, little eyes, what you see, O be careful, little eyes, what you see, For the Father up above is looking down in love, O be careful little eyes, what you see,” he stopped singing. The verses that cover little ears, little feet and little tongues had always seemed to negate too him. As he looked out the window he saw extreme poverty and despair. He thought it was ironic that they were driving through such horrible scenes singing about what they ought not be doing as Christians.

“Then,” he wrote, “suddenly I realized there is a very different way of understanding that song. I had always interpreted it as a set of don’ts. Then I realized these children were singing about a very active Christianity. These two little Haitian girls had become members of this missionary community precisely because that community was willing to see and hear and touch in a God-honoring way. Civil Chris-

tians know that they must actively ‘be careful’ about what they say. But they also connect their ways of speaking to their ways of seeing and hearing and walking and touching.”

Make speech a form of ceaseless prayer.

As we speak kindness to the least of these, we offer ourselves to God. Learning to speak kindly, like learning to pray, involves disciplined practice. Such a discipline, however, is a gift of God. As we practice our faith by speaking kindly, we experience God’s kindness as well.

Written by Carol Younger, Broadway Baptist Church, Fort Worth, Texas.

Judging Others

Introduction

In the late '60s, an expression floated around that may have had more of an effect on society than was realized at the time. "Here come da' judge" was hurled by the younger generation at the older generation to poke fun at the establishment's evaluation of the thoughts and actions of a new generation.

While the expression cannot take all the credit (and maybe none), a whole generation grew up thinking that judging someone else was entirely wrong. Anything goes was the mantra. That generation continues to struggle with making judgments about moral issues and personal circumstances and is passing that perspective on to the succeeding generations.

When it comes to Christianity, the cry is that it is wrong for Christians to judge, whether on a national or a personal level.

In a search on the Internet, judgmentalism had over 24,000 matches. One of the first matches was a Web site that attacked the hypocrisy of Christians making judgments about other people. The fact that there is such a Web site serves only to highlight the concern and confusion people have about the role of judgment in a Christian's life.

The Biblical Witness

What does the Bible have to say about judging? Is judging equal to being judgmental?

Matthew 7:1-5

¹ "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. ²For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. ³Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? ⁴Or how can you say to your neighbor, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' while the log is in your own eye? ⁵You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed the issue of judging others: "Do not judge, so that you may not be judged" (v 1).

At first glance, we might conclude that Jesus prohibited his followers from any kind of judging. If Jesus' teaching ended there, we would certainly be correct. But we must consider the rest of the teaching.

Matthew places this teaching on judging following the teaching on trust in divine providence (Mt 6:25-34). This sequence is not incidental to the understanding of the teaching about judging. What precedes the passage is the assurance to the believer that his or her life is in God's gracious care. The implicit understanding is that this assurance is due to God's unmatched generosity. In this context, the teaching turns to judging others.

God already has established a pattern for relationships in which we deal generously with others. But we can be involved in activities that shift God's dealings with us from generosity to harshness. This reality is explicit in what follows the "judge not" statement.

The judgments we get from our judging are not judgments from others but judgments from God. “You will be judged” refers to God’s action not ours. We are in control of the severity of those divine judgments by the way we judge others.

The word hypocrite (v 5) is not used to characterize all judging. Instead, it refers to acts that do not include some self-criticism first.

The image of the splinter and the beam is as dead serious as it is humorous. The one with the beam has an attitude of superiority in which there is no need for a judgment against the judge. To avoid the charge of hypocrisy, Jesus commends us to some self-criticism (inspection). We are to apply the same standards to ourselves that we apply to others.

There is not a prohibition against judging, but a doubling of the load to include yourself in the mix. According to Jesus’ teaching, we may avoid the label of being judgmental (hypocritical) by applying the same standards to our behavior that we are willing to apply to others.

Romans 14:1-13

¹Welcome those who are weak in faith, but not for the purpose of quarreling over opinions. ²Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. ³Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them. ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand. ⁵Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. ⁶Those

who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. ⁷We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. ⁸If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. ⁹For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. ¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. ¹¹For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.” ¹²So then, each of us will be accountable to God. ¹³Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another.

In the final chapters of Romans, Paul turned his attention to the living out of the faith that he had proclaimed earlier in the letter.

In Romans 14:1-13, Paul took up the issue of judging. Evidently, a spirit of judgmentalism was destroying the unity of the churches to which Paul wrote. He specifically addressed the issue of self-righteousness (another name for hypocrisy).

The issue was over eating whatever one liked or eating only vegetables as a Christian lifestyle choice. Neither the weak (the vegetable eaters) nor the strong (the “whatever-I-like-because-I-have-freedom” eaters) was taken to task by Paul for either choice. Paul did not care what the choice was. What did concern him was the attitude each group had toward the other and what it was doing to the unity of the fellowship. His concern was judgmentalism.

Paul suggested that judgmentalism was not appropriate because Christians were responsible for their actions to God and not to each other. As long as the actions were done to honor God (v 6), no one but God, to whom the actions were directed, could stand in judgment.

Apparently, Paul felt each Christian had enough to do taking care of his or her own life, without worrying about someone else (vv 10-12). Paul incorporated the value of self-examination as he proposed the principle of not doing that which would cause another to stumble. Unlike the spirit of judgmentalism, the believer was encouraged to know the brother or sister in Christ well enough to be able to curb one's own actions so as to strengthen the brother or sister (v 13).

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Judgmentalism, then, in Christian terms, is not the act of judging. Jesus' and Paul's teachings both expect judging to be a part of the Christian life.

Judgmentalism involves judgments about other people or groups without being willing to apply the same criteria to oneself. Judgmentalism occurs when one is not involved in a program of self-critical examination.

The biblical picture leads us to the conclusion that avoiding a spirit of judgmentalism is to engage in healthy self-criticism.

Here are some ways to engage in the practice of healthy self-criticism.

Improve your self-esteem. Self-esteem relates to our ability to be self-critical. The higher your esteem for yourself the

better your ability to self reflect. The higher your self-esteem the better your ability to turn that self reflection into a life-practice that is Christlike.

Put on the other person's shoes. When you are self-critical, you can try on the proverbial "other person's shoe" a little easier. The shoe may have more of a Cinderella slipper-fit if your daily walk journeys inward, reaching to the depths of your soul, finding places where the Spirit can repair, move and grow within.

Monitor your speech for tone and content. Sometimes we mold our stereotypes together into a judgmental attitude that "slips" out in seemingly innocent ways.

For example, one might say, "the car wreck was caused by a bunch of (pick a race or group you stereotype), all piled in the car together, if you know what I mean." The little phrase "if you know what I mean" serves to make sure the storyteller knows others are joining in with the "harmless" comment about a person or group of people. The storyteller is insinuating that all people of this "type" always pile into cars together and therefore usually cause wrecks.

Do people of whatever type we chose to fill the blank with always have too many people riding in a car and always cause wrecks? Of course not, but the insinuation degrades the group and builds other negative feelings toward the group. Reflecting on our words at the end of the day may help alleviate judgmental tones and words from our conversations.

Evaluate how you view other opinions. Do other people's solidly formed opinions get in your way as you seek to be judgmental-free? In a religious climate that is either so right or so wrong in our opinion, finding even our sisters and

brothers in Christ to be on our “judgmental list” is easy to do.

Others with convictions equally as strong as yours may fit into your “misled” category. But a judgmental attitude against others who do not hold your views ignores Paul’s warning that Christians are responsible to God. A judgment against someone who says flowers are blue when you say flowers are yellow ignores that another’s way of honoring God may not be your way of honoring God.

Put a new twist on the basics. As the three R’s are essential to academic progress, the Christian faith has essentials: (1) Bible reading and study; (2) prayer; (3) fellowship with other Christians; and (4) practicing the Christian life. Having a self-critical pair of lenses as we go through each of these essentials will help to remove some of the judgmentalism.

Add a dose of humor to your self-examinations. Humor provides some padding for the evidence found through self-criticism. Healthy self-criticism should move one toward wholeness, not chop one up into little bits.

A cartoon highlights the frustrating experience of self-criticism. Sitting at a desk, a person picks up the phone and says, “Hello, operator. Put me in touch with myself.” If only it were that easy!

Parents learn a lot about consequences. They see how natural and prescribed consequences help grow children into healthier and happier people.

As Christians, we can see how the consequence of practicing judgmentalism can lead others down the same path. We cause others to stumble when we find minor faults in them and ignore the major faults in ourselves.

Growing as a Christian is a beautiful process of looking within to see what honors God and what needs to be tossed aside. This honest reflection may keep others from stumbling along their way toward growth as a Christian.

Written by Joy and Wayne Hager. Joy is grief counselor and social worker for Northern Hospice in Mount Airy, NC, and Wayne is pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Mt. Airy.

Keeping Our Word

Introduction

The opening of my brother's animal hospital was almost ruined because the bankers who lent the money refused to keep their word. One section of the complex loan agreement required the animal hospital to pay the entire cost for a sewer line that would cross several undeveloped lots to make a connection at the hospital. The bank promised to reimburse the hospital for the costs of the additional sewer hookups when those lots were sold.

Several months after the animal hospital paid for the entire sewer line, my brother discovered that the bank had sold the additional lots. When he requested the reimbursement from the bank, the bankers at first loudly denied that they had made the promise. Only when confronted with the written agreement did they finally issue a reimbursement, and even then they paid only a portion of the agreed-upon amount.

“Go ahead and sue,” they basically said, “your legal fees will be greater than the amount remaining and the resulting delay in the opening of the animal hospital might ruin you financially!” Apparently the fact that the bankers were breaking their word was irrelevant.

Does it make you angry when someone lies to you? Regrettably, lying and dishonesty are widespread.

Two of the most disillusioning moments of my life came when two presidents, one a Republican and one a Democrat, went on national television, looked the American people in the eye, and lied to us. Certainly Richard Nixon

and Bill Clinton will be remembered as two of the most gifted political leaders of this century, but as men who did not tell the truth.

We can admire the way each of them demonstrated strong leadership as leaders of the free world. But their lies, spoken solely to avoid taking responsibility for their actions, have made Americans more distrusting and cynical.

Unfortunately, it is all too easy to find examples of dishonesty in our society. A number of years ago, one anonymous survey of college football players, who went on to play in the National Football League, found that more than 30 percent of them admitted taking under-the-table payments while in college. Because of its geographical location, one of the college conferences most likely to include many Baptist football players was in the South. But this conference led all other conferences in cheating, as 52 percent of its players admitted taking the payments.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness bluntly tells many tales of lying and dishonesty.

Joshua 6-7 records the dishonesty that took place while the Israelites were capturing Jericho. Joshua had warned the people that everything they captured was to be “devoted to destruction” (6:18), rather than kept by individuals as spoils of war. “But the Israelites broke faith in regard to the devoted things: Achan... took some of the devoted things” (7:1). Achan could not plead ignorance either. He discovered a beautiful mantle (NIV “robe”) in addition to silver coins and a gold bar and buried all three in the ground inside his tent. Achan intentionally acted dishonestly and his actions hurt all of Israel.

Read Joshua 7:1-26 to see how God punished the Israelites for Achan's sin and how his crime was treated as a capital offense.

Eventually the Jewish people developed a system designed to encourage honesty. They created different vows that a Jew would make to indicate that in this instance, he or she was absolutely telling the truth. For example, if you made a vow "toward Jerusalem" it was considered binding. You were really telling the truth!

Unfortunately, this system of swearing vows became quite complex. Dishonest people found ways to create legal loopholes in it. They made vows, such as swearing "to Jerusalem," that sounded similar to the binding vows, but were not officially binding. Then they could break their word without feeling guilty.

Actually, it sounds quite similar to the practice of American children who make promises on school playgrounds with their fingers "crossed" behind their backs.

Matthew 5:33-37

³³ *"Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.'* ³⁴*But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven for it is the throne of God,* ³⁵*or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.* ³⁶*And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black.* ³⁷*Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

Jesus saw clearly how the system of vows had been corrupted. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus wiped away the entire system of binding and nonbonding vows. He summa-

rized several Old Testament verses (Lev 19:12; Num 30:2 and Deut 23:21).

Jesus then placed his own interpretation above the Old Testament and all rabbinical teaching, with the words, "But I say to you...." He explained that any object or place by which one took an oath was something created by God. Therefore, it was not appropriate to use something created by God as a means of deception.

Jesus raised the standard of honesty to its highest possible level: "Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No' be 'No.' Anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Mt 5:37, NIV).

Jesus elaborated on the same theme again in Matthew 23:16-22 and James concisely summarized Jesus' command from the Sermon on the Mount: "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation" (Jas 5:12).

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Dishonestly is widespread in our society. Many in our postmodern culture doubt if there is such a thing as absolute truth. Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, declared, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."

But in that very dilemma lies our opportunity!

People, even people who sometimes fail to keep their word, hate being lied to and deceived. They dislike receiv-

ing letters that make it sound like they have won a prize until they read the fine print! They complain loudly when their auto repair shop misleads them into authorizing unnecessary and expensive repairs to their car. Their righteous indignation flares up when they are watching a football game and a receiver from the other team dives to make a catch, hops up holding the ball and claims he caught it, when the replay shows clearly that he trapped it. “He lied!” they cry. These sometimes-honest people stand somewhat in awe when a professional golfer calls a penalty on himself, a penalty that might cost him thousands of dollars, or when a teenage girl enters their store and returns a \$10.00 bill, “because you gave me too much change yesterday.” These same people sometimes thank God in prayer and wish out loud that there were more such honest people in their lives.

If we, as followers of Jesus Christ, practice his command of absolute honesty, then we will challenge and intrigue secular society by our example.

Opportunities abound for us to witness to others by keeping our word.

One place to start is by considering carefully the promises we make as we marry and then keeping those promises. The Promise Keepers movement has reminded millions of men that Christian husbands are obligated to keep promises made to their wives and families. The real key to the movement’s success is that it encourages husbands to keep their promises through peer support, testimonies and fellowship.

When young Christian husbands or wives have been arguing with their spouse, they need a place where they can honestly discuss the problems, discover that other Chris-

tians have had similar problems and see that the problems can be overcome. Without that support, they may think that their marriage has little chance of enduring and that there is not much point in remaining faithful to their wedding vows.

Churches must also provide nurturing environments to help Christian men and women keep their word to their spouses.

Another place to teach honesty is in the home. Many Christian parents, both married and single, strive to teach their children the value of honesty. At the same time, they teach the value of achievement and success. Children may quite easily assume that the two are equally important, or perhaps that achievement and success are more important.

We must teach our children what Jesus said about letting our yes be yes. That lesson must be continually reinforced through our words and actions.

Discovering a carpet stain caused by a carelessly spilled cup of juice may incite our anger, but somehow little Lisa must be taught that the most important issue is for her to tell mom and dad what honestly happened. Older sister Dawn may be competing with other bright high school students who sometimes top her grades by cheating on tests or lying to convince the teacher to grant extensions on overdue projects. She needs parents, a youth minister, Sunday school teachers and peers to remind her that God esteems honesty more highly than a 4.0 average.

The business world provides a great challenge for believers trying to live by the standard Jesus set in the Sermon on the Mount. How often has an honest salesman lost a sale because his rival “bent” the truth about a product? How often has a small-business owner been tempted to swallow

her integrity by telling an anxious supplier, “the check’s in the mail” and then ordering the bookkeeper to send it out ASAP. But if she can take the short-term hits that honesty may bring, what a witness she can create through a company that develops a reputation for keeping its word.

In a world where dishonesty sometimes seems rampant, people long to be treated honestly, to marry a Promise Keeper, to find a tennis partner who calls the close shots fairly, to buy a new carpet from a salesperson who does not say, “The price will never be this low again.”

Christians must practice keeping their word. Christian parents must raise children who refuse to cheat. Christian families, both biological families and church families, must model the honesty Jesus demanded.

Jesus’ honesty was one quality that attracted people to him in the first century. It still does.

Written by Mark Olson, pastor, Snyder Memorial Baptist Church, Fayetteville, NC.

Forgiving

Introduction

A woman was raped in a neighboring city. It was a violent act that changed her life forever. The authorities arrested the man. The woman made a positive identification of her assailant. On her testimony, the man was convicted and sent to prison, although he maintained his innocence throughout the trial.

While in prison, he overheard another prisoner talking about a rape he had committed. The prisoner became convinced this was the man who had committed the crime for which he was being punished. After years of legal red tape, he was given another trial. Through the use of DNA testing, he was eventually acquitted of all charges. Yet his life had been ruined. He had spent several years in prison and his family had suffered greatly.

Even so, when the woman whose testimony had sent him to prison asked for his forgiveness, he gave it. He released her from the responsibility of what happened to him, and the two are now friends.

This story amazes us because it describes something unusual, even rare, namely an act of forgiveness. Ironically, forgiveness is one of the characteristics of believers. Forgiveness is one of the practices of being a Christian. It is one of the things that distinguishes us from nonbelievers.

Before we can learn how to forgive, we must unlearn some mistaken ideas about forgiveness. In his book *Forgive and Forget*, Lewis Smedes clears up some common misunderstandings about forgiveness:

Forgiving is not excusing. We excuse people when we understand they are not to blame for our hurt.

Forgiving is not stifling conflict or suppressing hurt feelings. Fear of conflict usually leaves us open to be hurt again and rarely brings healing.

Forgiving is not accepting people. “We accept people because of the good they are for us. We forgive people for the bad things they did to us.”

Forgiving is not tolerance. Forgiving heals hurts rather than simply learning to live with them. “You can forgive someone almost anything. But you cannot tolerate everything.”

Our culture promotes retaliation when we are wronged as evidenced by the many lawsuits clogging our court system. Find someone to blame. Hold him or her responsible. Make the guilty party pay. So, our culture asks, “Why forgive?”

A Christian has three answers to this question:

- We forgive because God commands it. As we will see in the biblical witness on forgiveness, God has made it clear that believers forgive others as God forgives them.
- We forgive because forgiveness is the best way to liberate oneself from the pain of hurts. Retaliation does not do it. Smothering our hurt and anger doesn't do it. Only forgiveness heals.
- We forgive because it restores relationship. When we are hurt by someone's words or actions, relationship with that person is threatened and often lost. Forgiveness deals honestly with the hurt, sends it away and welcomes the person back into relationship.

The Biblical Witness

The biblical witness instructs forgiveness. Consider these tests.

Matthew 18:23-35

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ ²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. ³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

The parable of the unforgiving servant is a poignant story. Its point is transparent: God has forgiven us and God expects us to forgive others. The story also reveals that

God has forgiven us far more than we have to forgive others. The principle of forgiveness is that same regardless of the debt or hurt.

The unforgiving servant showed he did not adequately appreciate what his creditor had done for him. When the unforgiving slave met a fellow slave, the unforgiving slave seized “him by the throat” and demanded payment (v 28). The fellow slave’s plea for patience was ignored (v 29). The unforgiving slave threw him in prison (v 30).

The same is true for us. To state it in a positive way, our gratitude for God’s grace increases our “want-to” to forgive. The more we appreciate what God has done for us, the more willing we will be to do the same for others. It helps us overcome our hurts. Philip Yancey, author of *What’s So Amazing about Grace?* wrote that forgiveness breaks the cycle of “ungrace” that hinders meaningful relationship.

This parable also reveals the dangers of refusing to forgive. When the creditor who had forgiven the unpayable debt learned of the servant’s refusal to forgive a tiny debt, he revoked his kindness and sent the unforgiving servant to debtor’s prison (vv 31-34).

Jesus wants us to see the hypocrisy of receiving God’s forgiveness on the one hand and refusing to forgive others on the other. This is a sober warning that forgiveness is not an option for a Christian.

When Jesus gave the model prayer, he included a petition for forgiveness. Jesus said, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Mt 6:12).

Notice this petition is part of other petitions that represent our basic needs—daily bread and protection from tempta-

tion and evil. Is Jesus suggesting that forgiveness is a basic need, both to receive and to give? Seen in this way, God provides the ability to forgive just as God provides other basic necessities for life.

It has been suggested that the “as” in the forgiveness petition of the Lord’s Prayer is the most terrifying in the English language. Why? “The fact that Jesus plainly links our forgiveness by the Father with our forgivingness of fellow human beings,” wrote Yancey. Think about it. Praying this prayer means we want God to forgive us in the same manner and with the same frequency and sincerity as we forgive others. When this petition is taken seriously, forgiving others takes on a much higher priority.

Matthew 18:21-22

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”

The Jews in Jesus’ day were legalistic about forgiveness. They counted how many times they forgave others.

One day, Peter asked Jesus how many times he should forgive a person who wronged him. Before Jesus could answer, Peter suggested he might be willing to forgive as many as seven times. Jesus’ answer exposed Peter’s legalism: “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times” (v. 22).

The point is: true forgiveness does not keep score. It does not have limits. God’s grace powers forgiveness!

Does this mean others may take advantage of us? Sure, but the willingness to forgive comes from the desire, even

the need, to have relationship. God forgives us over and over again because he knows it is the only way to have relationship with us. We also extend forgiveness more times than we can count in order to have relationship with others.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Christian ethicist Lewis Smedes suggested four steps to forgiving our deep hurts.

Identify the hurt. Not all hurts require forgiveness. Some can be dealt with best with a sense of humor. When a hurt does require forgiveness in order to restore a relationship, be honest with yourself about the hurt you feel. Real forgivers do not pretend they do not suffer. Name the source of your hurt and resolve to heal it.

Feel the anger. Hurt leads to anger. Anger often leads to revenge. Learn to express anger appropriately. Rightly vented anger is without malice or vengeance, yet, it places responsibility for the hurt where it belongs. This is hard for some people, especially compliant persons, but it is necessary if healing is to come.

Heal yourself. Perform spiritual surgery inside your soul. "When you forgive someone for hurting you, ...you cut away the wrong that was done to you so that you can see your 'enemy' through the magic eyes that can heal your soul," Smedes wrote.

The ancient Jews had a ritual to portray this business of forgiveness. They laid a burden representing a person's sins on a goat and sent it off into the wilderness symbolizing that person's forgiveness of sin was carried away on the scapegoat.

Welcome the offender back into relationship. This requires the cooperation of the offender. If relationship is to be restored, the offender must bring complete truthfulness with him or her to the relationship. Truthfulness about what was done, truthfulness about your feelings and truthfulness about the future of the relationship must be expressed. A relationship must be expressed. A relationship that is restored through forgiveness can be stronger than before but it requires honest and intentional work by both forgiver and forgiven.

The practice of forgiving is not unique to Christians, but we have an advantage in that we have God's forgiving grace at work in us.

How can we know when we have actually forgiven someone who has hurt us? Lewis Smedes says we have forgiven when we can recall that person and feel the power to wish him or her well.

The ultimate picture for this is Jesus praying from his cross, "Father forgive them."

Written by David Crocker, pastor, Central Baptist Church of Fountain City, Knoxville, Tenn.

Blessing

Introduction

Our deacons have a “good news” time in their meetings during which they speak of what God is doing in the church ministries. They often speak of the positive things the staff is doing. Recently, one deacon put wind in the sails of my heart with a word about something I had done to help one of our members. This deacon is of such stature in our church that the words were heard not only as an expression of gratitude but as a blessing on me.

But, what is a blessing? Gary Smalley and John Trent in *The Gift of the Blessing* define a blessing as beginning “with meaningful touching. It continues with a spoken message of high value, a message that pictures a special future for the individual being blessed, and one that is based on an active commitment to see the blessing come to pass.”

To bless someone or some thing is to place a special value or honor on that person or object.

The Biblical Witness

Numbers 6:22-26

²²The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, ²⁴The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; ²⁶the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

Blessing provides protection and fulfillment. The Lord instructed Moses to teach Aaron to bless the Israelites with

words of protection and fulfillment. God gave Aaron permission to bring his (God’s) blessing to people. This wandering and often wavering people needed to be reminded constantly of their relationship with God. God gave the people security even as God was the source from which all their blessings flowed (v 24).

The intent of the blessing was to open their hearts to “the Lord,” so that God would look favorably upon them (v 25). As they contemplated the character of God, embodied in God’s name, they could begin to understand the ways God acted on their behalf. The blessing culminated with the granting of the consuming desire of God’s people, “peace” (v 26).

Both inner peace and peace with others are united in this blessing and are seen as the sum of all the good that God brings to us. For the apostle Paul, the fulfillment of this blessing came through the discovery that all God’s promises find their yes in Christ (2 Cor 1:20).

Genesis 17:5-8

⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. ⁶I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.”

Blessing carries the power to affect the future. While the Aaronic blessing addresses the spiritual character of

God's people, the Abrahamic blessing carries the power to bring about the future that is inherent in words of blessing. Genesis 17 allows us to listen in on God's covenantal conversation with Abraham.

The simple changing of his name (v 5) forecast a future nation. The promise of an "everlasting covenant" with God confirmed the significance of Abraham's life and gave a hope for his posterity (v 7). More than the land God promised Abraham, God committed himself to this people. With these words of blessing and future came the covenant of relationship.

Luke 6:27-28

27 "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

Blessing provides a way to deal with enemies. Jesus extended the concept of blessing to include difficult relationships. Fortified with the confidence of God's blessing in one's life, Jesus encouraged believers to "love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (v 27). Jesus did not want his followers to miss God's ongoing blessing through preoccupation with their own rights or even what was right or fair. The invitation encouraged imitation of Christ through turning the other cheek, living generously and showering good on others (vv 28-31).

Romans 12:14

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Blessing keeps us from cursing others—and ourselves. Paul recognized that the mistreatment of believers could move from being taken advantage of to persecution. Yet, he called on believers to bless rather than curse those who

abused. Paul left no place for Christians to have enemies. Hatred of enemies damages us more than our enemies. Therefore, we are to bless them, and—in the process—we bless ourselves.

Practicing Down-to-Earth Faith

Smalley and Trent suggest that blessing has five specific elements by which we bless others: meaningful touch, spoken message, attaching "high value" to the one being blessed, picturing a special future for the one being blessed, and an active commitment to fulfill the blessing. Believers can find ways to practice blessing each day.

Meaningful Touch. Often the blessings in the Old Testament involved touching. In blessing Joseph's sons, Jacob kissed them, hugged them, and laid his hands on them (Gen 48:10, 14). These are appropriate ways of touching for us. Adults as well as children need meaningful touch. In today's society, one must be careful that the touches are considered meaningful by those receiving them, but many long for someone to touch them in a meaningful, encouraging way.

A Spoken Message. Presence communicates many messages, but children and adults need to hear a spoken message. "I'm proud of you!" "I love you." "I'm glad you are my _____." Messages like these when heard often enough, come to be a part of the person's being. One father, in the presence of a friend and her elderly mother, told his three-year-old son that he loved him. The friend replied, "That is something I never heard either of my parents say to me."

Attaching "High Value" to the One Being Blessed.

One husband called his wife and two daughters together and played the song, "You Are My Hero." What an affirmation!

Picturing a Special Future. We can picture and convey meaningful goals to those we bless. This does not mean that we manipulate their future to our ends. Rather, we help them see the gifts God has given them. Instead of blessing our children, many parents curse their children by telling them they will never amount to anything. One intelligent, creative man grew up hearing a much older brother tell him that he would never amount to anything. Although quite talented, he never overcame those early words.

Make an Active Commitment. Words alone can often be hollow. Committing ourselves to making those words of blessing come to pass will indicate that we are serious about the blessing and help the blessing become a reality. A husband who recognizes certain gifts in his wife or children will need to commit to developing those gifts. If a child has an interest in music, an active commitment would provide musical instruments and lessons as far as that is financially possible.

Fuller Seminary ethics professor Glen Stassen writes that Romans 12:14 “echoes Jesus’ teaching, ‘Pray for those who persecute you’ (Mt 5:44). In the New Testament, to bless people is to pray for them. It is to want good for them, to identify with God’s good will for them, to affirm their valid interests.”

In my life, mentors have expressed their pride in me and spoken words of hope and success for me. Each time I have left these significant people who believe in me, I have discovered renewed courage to believe in myself.

My children have stood taller with renewed confidence as I worked with them to refocus their attention away from life’s woes and on the possibilities they could reach if they believed in themselves as much as I believe in them.

Friends bless friends through shared experiences of life as the people who know us best express their belief in us, regardless of the situation.

Put Blessing into Your Life. The people of the Old Testament can teach us a lesson in blessing at this point. The Jewish people have a series of ceremonies in which they seek to bless and be blessed at significant times in life. Some ceremonies surround the birth of a child. Others occur when the child is one month old and another when the child turns twelve. Still another blessing ceremony takes place when the child turns sixteen. Each of these ceremonies joins with a host of other ceremonies to highlight life’s special time by including various blessings for the time and event.

As Christians, we might do well to review our own ways of recognizing these significant events. Let us explore the ways we include the recognition of God’s blessing during these special times. We would do well to invite God’s blessing in the significant transitions occurring at various stages of life. Why not create a ceremony and enhance it with a written blessing or simply a word of thanksgiving?

Invite God into special days recognizing his lordship over all while giving value to each stage in life. Remind believers that God values each person. Let words forecasting a positive future encourage each to make the most of every opportunity by living responsibly before God.

As you take time to practice blessing, you will rediscover your own blessings.

Written by Harry and Nancy Lucenay. Harry is pastor of Kowloon International Baptist Church in Hong Kong.

Additional Study Resources For The Practice of Living Faithfully

BCE recommends the following books to provide additional insights into The Practice of Living Faithfully:

Dorothy C. Bass, *Receiving the Day: Christian Practices for Opening the Gift of Time*. 142 pages. Hardcover. \$20.00

A spiritual reconsideration of our frantic approach to time, *Receiving the Day* invites readers to embrace the temporal landmarks of our lives as opportunities for deeper relationship with God and one another. Dorothy Bass invites readers into a way of living in time that is alert to both contemporary pressures and rooted ancient wisdom. She encourages us to reevaluate our understanding of the temporal and thereby to participate fully in the Christian practice of knowing time as God's gift.

Dorothy C. Bass, Editor, *Practicing Our Faith*. 232 pages. Softcover. \$14.00

This book examines 12 time-honored practices shaped by the Christian community over the centuries, yet richly grounded in contemporary experience. Of this book, Robert Wuthnow, sociologist of religion at Princeton University, writes: "millions of Americans claim to be interested in deepening their spirituality, but many are swimming contentedly in shallow waters. The essays in this highly readable volume challenge us to practice our faith with greater dedication and imagination. Drawing inspiration from biblical tradition and from contemporary literature as well as their own experience, the authors show how such prac-

tices as hospitality, keeping Sabbath, forgiving, and singing, among others, can forge more deliberate and rewarding connections with the sacred."

Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality: Expecting Surprises*. 284 pages. Softcover. \$12.99

In a world of polite conversation, linen tablecloths and busy schedules, how can one be hospitable? In a world filled with drive-by shootings and neighborhood muggings, how does one love the stranger? This book calls readers to see the stranger as one who brings the gift of hospitality.

Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. 205 pages. Softcover. \$15.00

Christine Pohl revisits the discipline of welcoming strangers and provides the foundation for renewed commitment to recovering hospitality as a Christian tradition. Combining biblical and historical research with extensive interviewing of people in contemporary communities of hospitality, Pohl explores anew the necessity, difficulty, and blessing of practicing hospitality today.

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