

Shine!

100 Ways to be the Light of Christ

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Introduction

In my book *In His Place* a pastor gives his congregation what he calls the Incarnation Challenge. His point is that the incarnation of Jesus Christ did not end with his time on earth. It continues in the lives of Christians by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within them. The heart of the challenge is that Christians are to *be* Christ to the world around them. But how do we do that?

The purpose of this book is to provide useful answers to that question. Scripture tells us, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven” (Mathew 5:16). This is something Christ clearly expects of us and there are practical ways to do it, to be the light of Christ in a dark world.

What do people see when they look at us today? Do they see something different in us, people who have the aroma of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15) and show forth the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)? Too often the world looks at the average Christian and sees nothing different from the non-Christian or the person of some other faith. Or maybe they see someone who seems narrow, opinionated and no fun to be around. That doesn’t sound like Jesus, who was warm, open and welcoming even to “prostitutes and sinners.”

Is the light of Christ shining, and shining brightly, in us today? If not, what are we hiding? Certainly we shouldn’t be hiding our lights. We are to be light-bearers for Christ. The world needs to see Jesus!

This book was written to challenge rather than to comfort. Its purpose is to help us see the multitude of practical ways in which we can show Christ to the world around us. It is not to be picked up and read straight through, but to be absorbed on a “one day at a time” or similar, reflective, basis. After each reading there is a question for meditation and/or action.

Many who read this book are in the process of acting as mentors or spiritual friends to others even though we may not realize how much our life in Christ is affecting others. We who fall into that

category are making disciples for Christ and should want to know how to do that more effectively. After dealing with issues that challenge all of us, this book shifts ever so slightly into special situations...ones that we may not face but others do. Drawing on some thoughts from other writers and from Proverbs, these teachings should be especially helpful to you in ministering to others. An index by subject at the back of the book will help you reach these teachings when you want to share them with someone else.

May God bless you in being the light of Christ to your world.
Shine!

Something to Think About

Let's first think about that sort of odd parable in which Jesus seems to be commending a dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-13). One way of looking at why the manager in the parable commended the steward is in verse 8: "For the people of this world are more shrewd with their own kind than are the people of light."

Does it occur to you that those of us who are called to be the light of Christ should be spending chunks of time thinking of how we can influence others for good just as we do in thinking of ways to earn money or otherwise meet our personal needs and desires? That is one thing the Lord seems to be saying in this parable.

Of course we have responsibilities to our family, our co-workers, our church, our community and ourselves to do all sorts of things that just need to be done. And, there is nothing wrong with being creative (shrewd) in how we deal with those things. But how creative are we in shining the light of Christ in dark places?

When I asked myself this question I thought about the prayer my wife and I say each week for people we know in our neighborhood. Why not send a copy of that prayer to the people for whom we pray, asking them to let us know how to pray more effectively for their specific needs?

Prayerfully ask yourself the same question and see what you come up with. But don't stop there. Keep on asking and keep on doing because that is how you can let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

What creative thing might you do today that would shine Christ's light?

Active or Passive?

In John 14:12 Jesus tells his followers (and us) that we will do greater things than he has been doing. That was because he would be returning to the Father and we would be receiving the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us in his absence. Now, of course we don't think we will individually do greater things than Jesus, but he apparently meant that at least as the Body of Christ (the Church) here on earth, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we would.

So, how do we view this Holy Spirit within us? It seems to me that Christians look at the Holy Spirit either from an active or a passive point of view. Those who believe in the Holy Spirit in a passive way might say that they believe the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, that he did miracles through the Apostles, that he provides comfort in times of need and is otherwise sort of there in the background of the Church and of our lives. Those who believe in an active Holy Spirit look to him to work through them and the Church in a wide variety of ways, basically doing the same things Jesus did.

If you are to shine as the light of Christ in your world, which way works for you? Can you and the Body of Christ of which you are a part do the things Jesus did, and even greater things (at least when viewed in the sense of the whole Body of Christ) if the Holy Spirit is only passive in nature?

How active is the Holy Spirit in your life?

We Have Authority

When Christ spoke, people listened. They were astounded at his teaching because he spoke with authority, unlike the other Jewish teachers of his day (Matthew 7:29). Through his actions, such as when unclean spirits submitted to him, they saw his authority demonstrated (Mark 1:21-28). In giving his followers the Great Commission, Jesus claimed the authority granted unto him to send them forth (Matthew 28:18).

Christ's authority remains in his Church today, and resides in individual Christians. In *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser says that the incarnation began with Jesus and has never stopped. "God's physical body is still among us, just as present, just as physical and real as when God was in the historical Jesus. Now he is in the Body of Christ and in the lives of individual Christians. We enflesh Christ now, in this time." It is as we allow Christ's authority to be manifested through us that the world will see that the Church has answers to the world's needs. Churches, in this sense, are to be hospitals, not museums; Christians are to be instruments of God's healing power to the world around us rather than people who are focused solely on our own needs and desires.

For the authority of Christ to be freed from within us, there are at least four prerequisites that need to be met: (1) we are in a right relationship with God, (2) we are in a right relationship with our neighbor (defining that word broadly), (3) we know the authority from which we speak, and (4) our actions are authenticated by the ways in which God has equipped us. In this manner, Christ's light can shine through us into a very needy world.

How do you shape up against these four principles?

The Relationship with God

When we are born of God a total change comes over us. We experience what the Apostle Paul called having the eyes of our heart enlightened (Ephesians 1:18). God, who commanded that light shine out of darkness, now shines in our heart “to give us the light of knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). Our eyes are opened to see and our ears are opened to hear the voice of God within by the power of the Holy Spirit. God speaks to our heart, perhaps not in specific words but in a multitude of ways, to guide our thinking. We are now ready to discover whatever the Lord has for us to be and do.

We experience within ourselves the mighty working of the Holy Spirit and come to know the gifts of the Holy Spirit operative in our lives. We experience a peace that passes understanding. We sometimes feel a joy that is inexpressible. We sense love being poured into us because God loves us so much. We become able to distinguish good from evil. In these and countless other ways, we grow in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ.

Physical birth gives way to spiritual birth and we are born again into an abundant life in Christ. We have been born to be God’s people in the world around us. The light of Christ is to shine through us to everyone, but especially to those who have not yet experienced this second birth.

What does God have in mind for you right now?

The Relationship with Neighbors

Consider the familiar Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). An expert in the law challenges Jesus with the question of how to inherit eternal life. When Jesus asks him what the Law says, he responds with loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself. Jesus assures him that if he does this he will live. But then the man wants to know who his neighbor is, leading to the parable. In it a man is beaten by robbers and left for dead. A priest and a Levite pass by him, but a Samaritan stops and cares for him.

The priest and the Levite who passed by him in the story would perhaps have justified themselves on the basis of Leviticus 21:1-3 (to touch a dead or bloody person would have left them ceremonially unclean), and Jesus undoubtedly included them in the story to show how people tend to rationalize their inaction. Likewise, Jesus chose a Samaritan as his “hero” in the story because the legal expert who had raised the question would have hated Samaritans...just the opposite of what one should feel if he wants to love his neighbor. And, Jesus reverses the way we would tend to look at the question involved: instead of “Who is my neighbor?” it is “To whom am I a neighbor?”

An answer would be: The one to whom I sow the seeds of God’s love, because that is exactly what the Samaritan did. Anthony Bloom once said: “It is an error to think that man’s connection with life on earth ends with his death. In the course of one’s life one sows seeds. The seeds develop in the souls of other men and affect their destiny, and the fruit that is born of these seeds truly belongs not only to those who bear it but also to those who sow.” Every day of our lives is a day of sowing some kind of seeds. We have the opportunity to sow the seeds of God’s love everywhere we go. Or we might say we have the opportunity to shine the light of Christ’s love everywhere we go.

To whom might you be a neighbor today?

The Authority by Which We Speak

If you will permit my using such terminology, when Jesus captures the heart of our soul, there is the opportunity for Scripture to capture the mind of our soul. As John Bunyan pointed out, if we do not allow Scripture to capture the mind of our soul, our soul is starved of the thing it most needs. Our relationship with Jesus can hardly grow if the primary means of feeding it is ignored, and it is the authority by which we speak as Christians.

For those who understand this, the Bible brings a bountiful harvest to the soul. Its teachings captivate the soul, allowing us to rely on what it says and thus be guided in our everyday lives (2 Timothy 3:16). Just as we grow in the “knowing” of our Lord Jesus, we grow in knowing what Scripture would have us do in order to be living within the will of God. By it we are taught how to please God in everything. What’s more, the Bible is more than a guidebook; it is the living word to inspire us and give us hope. It is God’s book. It is his story, for our edification in all aspects of our lives.

To the one who believes Scripture, its promises are of more power than all the promises of mankind. This is how Christians down through the ages have accepted pain, suffering and death when promised, as an alternative, the things of this world. They have taken their stand with Jesus, and they have believed that the Bible reveals the fullness of how that stand is to be taken.

Scripture shines the light of Christ into our lives. As the famous old prayer says, “Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.”

What do you need to be doing to increase your knowledge of Scripture?

Being Well Equipped

God equips each of us for ministry to the needs of those around us, especially by gifts of the Holy Spirit (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4). And some people are also equipped by what they have experienced in life. Some years ago I had the pleasure of meeting a widow whom God used to minister to women who had recently lost their husbands. I met her at a time when I was working on ways to help people discover the ministries to which God was calling them. I have no idea what this woman's spiritual gifts were, but she had graciously survived the tragic death of her husband.

Here was a woman who, by the grace of God, had coped with the loss of her loved one. Through that experience, she had learned how to help others faced with the same problem. Christ's compassion flowed through her as she ministered to widows all over the town where she lived. Someone asked her why she felt competent to help widows although she had received no special training. "Your church staff have undoubtedly had extensive training in how to minister to the bereaved," the person said. "Why should they send you?" "Because," the widow replied, "they have never lost a husband."

It may be military terminology, but it so well applies to the situation: "The battle scars of life provide us with the battle ribbons of ministry." Each of us has undoubtedly had a tragedy of life—or at least a "battle scaring" experience—that well equips us to minister to those who find themselves in the same situation and that lets Christ's light shine through us in a special way.

What life experience has equipped you for shining Christ's light into the life of another?

A Little Humility Can Go a Long Way

Here's a great story from the book *Lead Like Jesus* by Ken Blanchard and Phil Hodges. After Blanchard had received his doctorate and was working at Ohio University, he wanted to take a course on organizational behavior and leadership taught by Paul Hersey, a well-known professor. When he asked if he could audit the course, Hersey told him, "No." The only way he would be allowed to take the course was for credit. Because Blanchard had his PhD and Hersey did not, the temptation was to let pride stand in the way, even though he knew "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18).

Fortunately, Blanchard's wife confronted him with his pride and prevented him from missing the opportunity that would be vital to his career. He enrolled in the class and wrote all of the required papers. When the class was over, Hersey approached him and invited Blanchard to collaborate with him in writing a textbook on organizational behavior. "It's hard for me to sit still and write," said Hersey. Earlier in his career, Blanchard had been told that he had no gift for writing. Blanchard's response to Hersey was, "We should make a great team...you can't sit still to write and I'm not supposed to be able to write. So let's give it a try." The result was a classic textbook now probably in its umpteenth printing, and the two went on to produce books that have sold millions of copies.

C. S. Lewis said, "According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere fleabites in comparison. It is through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind." Pride goes before destruction, but a little humility can go a long way toward letting Christ's light shine through our lives.

Is there any way that pride is standing in the way of your being a light-bearer today?

Making Disciples

Jesus gave us a Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel (28:16-20). In it, he makes it clear that he has *all authority* in heaven and earth. Under that authority, his followers are to go into all the world *making disciples*. This means baptizing people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything Jesus has commanded. He follows with the promise that he will be with us always and to the end of the age.

Think what is packed into these few words. As we go forth in Jesus' name, we are under his authority. We're not just to "hope we can do the best we can" as we follow his instructions; we are a part of his incarnate Body on earth empowered to do the work he has given us to do. We are not just to offer salvation, we are to make disciples...something that goes much further. We are to do it throughout the world ("all nations") and we have Jesus' promise to be with us in the process.

Evidence that we are disciples includes fulfilling our calling to make disciples of others. How about checking on how we are doing in that regard? Are we being effective in both telling the story and living the story of God's love in the presence of those God would like to see us leading to discipleship? Or have we told the story but have done nothing else for them (getting them into a church or a Bible study group, for instance)? If they are not nourished, their faith may soon die. How about those whom we know to be facing serious challenges in their lives? We fail them if we are not nurturing their growth in faith, mentoring them and helping them deal with their problems. The issue is discipleship. Jesus commissioned us to make disciples. That is a process. It doesn't end with proclaiming the message of the kingdom of God. It ends when the one who has been brought to the Lord is himself a disciple, ready to go make disciples.

What next step might you take to help another person move into discipleship?

Learning from the Living and the “Dead”

When we are called to positions of Christian leadership and responsibility (Luke 9:1), it can be a major breakthrough in our lives and a great opportunity to let our light of Christ shine for the benefit of others. It can also lead to a new level of relationship with the Lord. Depending on what is being asked of us, we might be filled with some qualms about being able to perform as well as expected. But the fact that we have been called to do it, and the confidence that others have shown in us, should motivate us to do the best we can. We can be grateful to the Lord when we are given opportunities such as this, and we should be confident that God would not call us to do anything without also giving us the strength and ability to do it well.

Having said that, in order to fulfill what is expected of us, Francis de Sales, the French devotional writer, said we should seek assistance from the living and the “dead.” To seek help from the living means building a relationship with those who are best able to prepare us for the challenges ahead. We look to those whom we admire because they perform effectively and in a spirit of Christian servanthood, and we take seriously what they have to share with us out of the abundance of their experiences.

Seeking help from the dead means relying on the example of those saints of God who have gone before us, as we discover them in Scripture and by way of their writings; and from our own personal knowledge of “heroes of the faith” who have blessed our lives but have now gone to be with the Lord. Each new challenge of leadership is an opportunity to seek spiritual growth by learning from the giants of the faith who have shared their journey in ways we can read about and from whom we can draw guidance and inspiration. God wants us to have the humility to be under the authority of those who have cut the pathway before us as we enter new territory on his behalf.

To whom might you turn for answers today?

Stand Firm

In a recent talk, a friend stressed how important it is, in the age in which we live, to take a stand. He said we need to: stand up for Jesus, stand out from the crowd, stand beside our brothers and sisters in Christ, stand in the place of Jesus, stand in the power of the Holy Spirit, and stand against the powers of darkness. Peter pointed out that our character is developed and our faith is purified when we are tested. (1 Peter 1:3-7)

Ours has been called the “post-Christian era.” We live in a time when the Judeo-Christian principles that once determined the moral and ethical standards of our country are being greatly eroded. We are shocked at what we see and hear on television and in motion pictures; or, worse still, we have been numbed beyond the shock, and have begun to accept as “normal” things that Scripture would call sin. It is into this situation that Christians are called to take a stand.

Today will be another opportunity to stand firm, to attest to Gospel truth; and it is another way in which the light of Christ should be shining through us. The world is sick, and needs that healing truth as much today as it has at any time in the past. But, just as the bone structure of the human body allows us to have freedom of movement, standing firm in Christ is not blind rigidity, but freedom that is based on a sound foundation.

In what ways does God want you to stand firm today?

Going to God

The best way to live is to be in communion with God all day long, as Paul encourages us to do (1Thessalonians 5:17). We can be in contact with him as often as we recognize the opportunities to do so. We don't have to wait for there to be a special time for prayer; we can go to God with every thought, feeling, or decision that we encounter. Even in the midst of going about our daily duties, carrying out our work, talking with others, we need to realize that any time is a time we can go to God.

Within this type of relationship, the Lord can warn us when we are about to say or do the wrong thing. That is the Holy Spirit working in us to guide our life. If, as a result, we realize the danger before it occurs, we should not resist the Spirit. If we fail to obey these warnings, our perception of the guidance the Spirit wants always to give us will fade and the light of Christ within us will fade as well. By refusing to pay attention and be obedient we grieve the Spirit. We do so at our own loss.

When we fail to realize or choose to ignore this guidance and have said or done the wrong thing, we can keep short accounts with God by going to him in repentance. We swallow our pride and go to God for his forgiveness, which he is merciful and generous to give. The result of the practice of going to God and offering everything to him in these various ways is the comfort, freedom, strength and grace that cannot be attained in any other way. And, as N. T. Wright has pointed out, prayer is a Trinitarian function: we pray to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit in the Name of Jesus.

In what sense do you need to go to God today?

Enjoying Life

When my wife and I took a cruise to Alaska led by Chuck Swindoll some years ago, he told us that we would be seeing spectacular scenery and we should exult in the Lord (Philippians 4:4) rather than being irritated by our fellow-passengers who might be concentrating on the slot machines. (Apparently on a prior cruise one of his folks had started lecturing the gamblers!).

According to the French spiritual director Fenelon, we are not meant to deny ourselves the opportunities we have to enjoy life in the normal course of things. God wants us to enjoy life. People who are so strict in their view of entertainment that they leave little room for themselves or others to find enjoyment in the lighter aspects of life are not effective witnesses of their faith. Where amusements are innocent in themselves and come in the ordinary course of life, there is nothing wrong with participating in them within the bounds of reason. A stiff, judgmental attitude, on the other hand, only gives worldly people a mistaken impression of the Christian faith as dull and boring.

God wants us to go forward with a simple heart in peace and joy. It is in this manner that we show forth the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the light of Christ can shine through us. The person who does all in the presence and power of God is still being faithful when engaged in what does not seem serious or substantial work so long as such activity is wholesome in nature and is carried out in a sportsmanlike manner.

There are specifically those activities in which we find ourselves involved in the course of our vocational and social obligations. These also come to us as a part of the graciousness of God and therefore we don't need to avoid them if they are good for our mental, physical or emotional health. There is no freer heart than that which God leads by simple faith.

In what sense do you need to free up your life?

Making Good Plans

There is a famous prayer that goes, “Make me ever mindful of the needs of others.” A wise friend switched the wording around and would pray, “Lord, make me needful of the minds of others.” We show wisdom when we seek advice from those who know more about the matter facing us than we do (Proverbs 15:22).

Sometimes we seem embarrassed to ask for guidance. We feel that, because of our age, experience, position, or whatever, we are supposed to know what to do. Asking someone’s advice seems an admission of weakness. Such an attitude is simply evidence of pride and lacks wisdom. We proceed at our own peril.

Others of us have a sort of tunnel vision. We are locked into one way of thinking and don’t want to be confused by the thoughts of others. We may well miss the best solution because our minds are closed to other ideas. Others—even if they don’t have the experience or expertise that we do—can enlarge our vision and broaden our perspective. It is wise to seek all the help we can get when we are making plans. We can make a practice of getting to know those people who have sound minds and good advice. If we are open to their ideas and suggestions, we will be much more likely to succeed, whatever our endeavor.

These principles particularly apply to our spiritual life. Being a part of a Bible study or prayer group puts us in contact with others whom we can grow to trust with our hearts and minds in the most important part of our life. Just having a prayer partner or Christian friend who is spiritually mature can be a blessing in helping us deal with the issues we face. Why try to go it alone when we can benefit from the Body of Christ, others who have been gifted by God to help us along the way? If we want to be Christ to our world, we need to let the light of Christ in others shine into our lives.

Whose mind are you needful of today?

Joy in the Heart

Joy is an inner quality in the life of the Christian. A fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), it is a work of the Holy Spirit within us. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect the outer circumstances surrounding us. Joy is centered in our relationship with God. That is the anchor that holds us in place regardless of the situation we are in. If we truly know that our life is in Christ, and that what really matters at any given time is what he expects of us, we can have joy in the midst of the worst kind of trouble.

The joy we have in our heart can bring joy to others. We can do it by a cheerful look. The people in the world around us—regardless of their culture, religious persuasion or whatever else—can spot joy in another person when they see him or her. We have the opportunity to be ambassadors of Christ and conveyers of the Good News just by genuinely smiling at others. A woman once asked Mother Teresa this: “You have this fantastic worldwide ministry, and I am just a housewife in Peoria, Illinois; what can I do?” Mother Teresa told her, “Just smile a lot.” A cheerful look brings joy to those around us.

It is, however, a heart issue. A forced smile won’t work. It is only the true reflection of joy within that shines as the light of Christ for the benefit of others. That is why it is so important to commit our lives into the Lord’s hands at the start of each day and remain in a right relationship with him through the course of the day.

How might you bring joy to someone today?

Someone Jesus Loves

We know that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, and we know that our neighbor is anyone with whom we come into contact (Luke 10:25-37). A Christian friend takes this command so seriously that he tries, in all his contacts, to look at the other person as someone Jesus loves, and therefore someone to whom he should show love. He has found that this attitude opens doors for him to share with others what Jesus means in his life. As a result, he has been able to share the Gospel, the Good News, in leading people into a relationship with Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

My friend's plan is easier said than done for me. There were two examples yesterday. My wife had agreed to let a vacuum cleaner service man come by the house to look at our vacuum and service it without charge. He also wanted to talk about our heating and air conditioning system for the house. My immediate reaction was a negative one; he would be coming at an inconvenient time and we already had reliable people who took care of the things he wanted to look at. And people like that aren't just out to do a good deed; they want to sell you something. I was not looking forward to that guy's visit. Then the Lord convicted me that I was not showing the attitude that my friend would have shown.

The other situation is just the general one of being in contact with a lot of different people in a lot of different circumstances during the course of any day. I just forget about my friend's plan in the course of daily living.

But, you know what? It is nonetheless a good plan. It is a great way to shine Christ's light. I'm going to try to do better; how about you?

Are you willing to look for Christ in at least one person today?

The Hand of God

People do not come to Jesus Christ by their own will, wisdom, and power, but by the gift, promise, and drawing of the Father. This is what theologians call prevenient grace. It is the grace of God that goes before any conscious presence of divine grace within us, working in our lives before we are aware of it. Just as God sent Philip to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8, he will use any means to reach us. John Bunyan said that this gives good reason for us to stand in wonder at the effectual working of God's grace to bring all people to Jesus Christ.

What was the means God used, either directly or indirectly, to bring you to Jesus? Was it moving you to a new location, some other shift in the arrangement of your life, the loss of a loved one, or some other dire situation? Was it a book—perhaps even the Bible—that caught your attention, hearing friends or neighbors speak of spiritual matters, seeing God at work in the lives of others, experiencing God's grace in relieving you of some great anxiety, or coming under the influence of godly counsel? Was it some combination of all of these things?

We should take notice of such providential incidents, because they are the hand of God, prevenient grace. They were sent and managed by his mighty power to do us good. God will join himself to our chariot so as to accomplish the good he has in mind for us. He will also use us as his means of grace in the lives of others the more we are conscious of and responsive to his Spirit in our lives. Not only are we beneficiaries of his prevenient grace, we can be the instruments of that grace in the lives of others. Indeed, that is what being the light of Christ is all about.

How might God use you to reach another person for Christ today?

Seed Sowing

One of the wonderful things about the parables of Jesus is that they can shed light in many directions, each direction helping us to see some vital facet of life. For example, the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23) can be interpreted in a number of ways. One is to think of it from the standpoint of the person sowing the seeds.

As Christians, we are to sow the seeds of God's love. Consider what this parable says to us about preparing to do that. The person who would sow actual seeds must prepare in certain ways. He would insure that he has the proper seeds, he would be sure it is the right season for planting, and he would have the determination to do what needs to be done to produce an abundant crop.

How does this apply to us if we are going to sow the seeds of God's love? Let's start with having the "right seeds." The seeds of God's love must be firmly planted and growing in our lives for us to be able to convey that love to others. What would be the "right season" for sowing? Just as the soil must be prepared to receive real seeds, our sowing of God's love will be most effective with those who are receptive to what God is doing in our lives...people with whom we have a relationship or whom we sense are in need of our love because of what is going on in their lives. And what about determination to do what needs to be done? If we seek to be disciples of Christ who will make disciples, sowing the seeds of God's love should not be a chore but a joy. The light of Christ can shine from us into the lives of others when we "sow seeds" in this manner.

If you're not sowing the seeds of God's love in the life of others, how might you begin to do so?

A Servant's Heart

There are many ways to give, and the best way is the giving of ourselves. We Christians are to place ourselves on the altar of God for him to use us in the world (Romans 12:1). And Jesus said, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45). As Christ's people in the world today, we are here to serve.

If we turn our lives over to the Lord first thing in the morning, we can begin the day by asking ourselves how we can be of service during the day. If we are sincere in doing this, the Lord will remind us of all sorts of things we can do for others as the day moves along. The servant attitude spawns many opportunities to serve that otherwise we might never have realized were there.

Our opportunities to serve are endless. They can start with being attentive to our spouse, children and co-workers and their special needs. It can mean giving our seat to an older person, holding the door open for others, allowing a driver to get into the lane of traffic in front of us, or other acts of common courtesy. It can be volunteering to do something someone else would otherwise have to do. It can be calling on someone who is lonely or in need. Making a contribution to a charity or other worthwhile endeavor is also an act of servanthood.

The giving of ourselves because of the love of God within us is not a one-time effort. We don't do what we are moved to do and then spend our time rejoicing in our own righteousness or wondering why others are not following our good example. Instead, having a servant's heart is a lifelong process, a godly, light shining way of looking at life.

How might you demonstrate, even if just to yourself, that you have a servant's heart?

Reputation

Do you ever think of what kind of reputation you have? As Christians, our focus should not be on the accumulation of wealth, power or prestige. It should be on doing the will of God. It is true that God can lead us into a vocation that results in our attaining wealth, for instance; but that is very different from seeking wealth for its own sake. There is nothing wrong with having money; it is the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Timothy 6:10).

A Christian's reputation, on the other hand, is a pearl of great price. If we want to be effective in this world as God's people, there is nothing we could more highly treasure than to be thought well of, to be trusted, and to be dependable; in other words, to have a good reputation. It is then that people will be open to Christ's love, through us. Thus, our reputation should be well guarded by our living in accordance with God's purpose for us. Others are always watching to see if our actions are in line with our professed beliefs.

Furthermore, we can be much more content within ourselves if we focus on what we can be grateful for (our reputation) rather than always wanting something we don't have (great riches). Reminding ourselves of the blessings God bestows on us is much more satisfying than yearning for things that are beyond our reach. If we can start thinking more about what we have than what we want, our life will improve. We'll find we have something much better than silver and gold, and it has a much better shine.

What kind of reputation do you want to have?

We Would See Jesus

There are two great evils that hang over life: sin and death. If we had eternal life but could not conquer sin, there would be no hope in us. If we were surrounded by all the good things of life but the shadow of death nonetheless hung over us, there would be no hope in us. Hope springs from the knowledge that there is one through whom both sin and death can be defeated. We would see Jesus, who conquered sin and death, who can show us the beauty of holiness, and speaks to us of eternal life in his Father's house (John 14:1-2).

We have all experienced the disappointment of our failures. At the end of the day, we may well say, "I wish I had not said or done that." We know that what we have said or done would not have been Jesus' way of handling the situation. We are sorry and we feel repentant. Or we learn of the death of a young person or a parent with young children, and we are distraught that such a thing should happen. Such things remind us of the reality of sin and death all around us. Yet, in the midst of our disappointment with ourselves or the pain of loss, there is still hope in us. We would see Jesus.

We can look at him and see our humanity without the stain of sin, and we can also know that the Cross is not the end of life. Jesus conquered all on our behalf in the Garden of Gethsemane. Based on what we now know about sin and death, let hope reign in us today. It is only as Christians let the light of Christ shine from their lives that others can come to know what we know about overcoming sin and death.

Take a moment to rejoice in the hope that is in you. That hope can shine through your life today for the benefit of others.

The Great Awakening

My friend Tom Gracie told this story on himself. He had led a teaching mission in a church, and then returned there some time later. A man came up to him and told him that he had been converted to Christ at that teaching mission. Gracie asked the man what he had said that had touched the man's heart sufficiently for him to give his life to Christ. "Oh, it wasn't anything you said or did," the man replied. "Actually, what happened was that one of the candles on the altar went out and no one relit it. I'm sitting there unhappy enough that my wife had literally dragged me to church with her, and I'm thinking, 'What kind of a church is this that lets the candle go out and won't relight it?' And then God says to me, 'You've been sitting in church all these years and your candle isn't lit!'"

In John 3:1-21, Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, and thus a leading Jew of his day, came to Jesus by night in hopes that no one would know that he was seeking answers from this itinerant Jewish miracle worker. He was a bright man, and he expected intellectual guidance. However, instead of speaking to Nicodemus' mind, Jesus spoke to his heart. There is nothing anti-intellectual about the Christian faith; and, in fact, God wants us to *know* what we believe about Christ. But there is more to faith than intellectual acceptance; it involves spiritual rebirth.

Spiritual *birth* comes in knowing that there is a God, someone over us on whom we are dependent. Nicodemus had that knowledge. Spiritual *rebirth* is accepting Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior: the essence of John 3:16. From the initial contact he had with Jesus, there is no reason to believe that Nicodemus took that step of faith. However, the fact that he joined Joseph of Arimathea in arranging Jesus' burial (John 19:38-40) gives us an indication that his candle was finally lit. If we are to be the light of Christ to the world around us, we need to be sure our candle is lit!

How well is your candle lit today?

Acknowledging Christ

God has surprises in store for us and some of them invade our comfort zone. An international conference on evangelism was held in the United States, attended by Christian leaders from all over the world. An African clergyman going through Customs as he entered the country was asked if he had anything to declare. He replied, “I declare that Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior.”

God may surprise us with situations in which we, uncomfortably perhaps, will be expected to acknowledge him and our commitment to him. Jesus made it clear to his disciples that that would happen (John 15:18—16:4). Jesus tried to prepare his followers for the persecution they would face. In fact, in the years that followed Jesus’ life on earth, the disciples experienced a great deal of persecution and martyrdom. And, as hard as it may be to believe, more Christians are being martyred in our day than at any time in the history of the world.

The persecution we face in the free world is of a more subtle form, but it is persecution nonetheless. If we are spiritually conscious of what is going on around us, virtually every day we have opportunities to acknowledge Christ in some situation or circumstance in which he is being derided or misunderstood, or in which Jesus needs to be held up that others might be enlightened by the truth in him. It is as we acknowledge him that we can know he will acknowledge us before the Father in heaven. The more the light of Christ shines through us, the more opportunities we will have to acknowledge him.

Be prepared to acknowledge Christ in some situation today even if it is just saying “God bless you” to someone you encounter.

Loving the Law

The discussion was about Internal Revenue Service audits, and the men engaged in the conversation were prominent and wealthy. One seemed especially relaxed in the midst of a heavy discussion about the hazards of such audits. Finally, someone asked him why he was so quiet. “I never cheat on my taxes, and I keep good records; why should I worry about an audit?” he replied.

Many people, including many Christians, tend to look at Scripture as legalistic and restrictive, as though God has given us a lot of rules and regulations that will keep us from enjoying life. Of course, just the opposite is true. God has given us “the Law” to protect us that we might live life to the fullest. It is by fulfilling God’s will for us through Scripture that we are free to live life without fear and without regret. Just like the guy who didn’t have to worry about an IRS audit.

There are certainly a lot of people in our world today who covet financial gain. They know that money represents power, influence and success. For many, money is god. They think of little else. It is true that money can buy certain comforts and offer some security. However, obedience to God is far more valuable than wealth, because it is a heavenly treasure rather than an earthly one (Luke 12:33). Discover today the freedom that comes from obeying God in all things and let the light of Christ shine through you to those with whom you come into contact all day long.

Reflect on the peace within you that comes from being obedient to God and walking the path that he has for you.

Christ's Love

Christ's love is not like human love. Our love tends to vary with our emotions, but Christ's love is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). His love has no ebbing or flowing, going too far or falling too short, no uncertainty. Of course, our perception of his love may not be consistent. He shows his love in a manner to fit our real needs, and often we do not know our real needs but only our perceived ones. Furthermore, our consciousness of Christ's love also depends on how closely we walk with him.

Christ's love does not lead us along wrong pathways. It is always in harmony with God's will for us. Anything thought to be Christ's love that is contrary to Scripture is not his love but a deception. One purpose of Christ's love is to shape us into people who love as he does. Because we do not fully know love, he teaches us of it through the indwelling Holy Spirit to the extent we are openhearted to receive the message.

Christ's love persists. It cannot be tempted to abandon us no matter what happens. Christ's love will continue to shine on us until all that is imperfect is subdued and yields to it. He wants to make us pleasing and wholesome, not because we are so but because he loves us so much. We will be the light of Christ today just by letting his love flow through us.

To whom do you need to show Christ's love today?

Life's Experiences

Life is a training ground for eternity. Life is an academy to educate us in the details of how God wants us to live. It is a refining process. Some like to think of it as the polishing of stones as they are rubbed together over a period of time in a creek bed or a tumbling machine. Others use the illustration of silver and gold being purified by fire (1 Peter 1:7), removing the dross. Neither illustration is a comforting one.

Each person must be exposed to this purification process if we are to grow spiritually and emotionally. We are to be shaped into the image God has in mind for each of us, or to fall short of that goal. We can be conformed to God's will if we are open to correction and if we are surrounded by those who love us enough to correct us when it is needed. If we seek to grow in the knowledge and love of God, there is no clearer sign of movement toward that goal than a willingness to be corrected. The best fruit of humility is knowing that we stand in the need of correction. (Although I don't want to set myself up as a model of humility, I can use this book as an illustration of the point. By getting several people to read the early drafts of it, I was able to see shortcomings in it that I would never have seen otherwise. Fortunately, rather than being defensive, I was able to be objective about the criticisms and (hopefully) this is a better book because of it).

Life is like a hospital in which we have the opportunity to be spiritually healed. We are all, to one degree or another, spiritual invalids who should seek to be cured. We can be healed if we are willing to undergo the necessary treatment. Those afflicted with physical ailments that require surgery must make the choice to undergo the operation or suffer the consequences. It is equally so concerning our spiritual ailments. Wholeness requires correction and cure, and life gives us the opportunity to experience both. Sometimes our light needs a little adjustment to allow it to shine all the brighter.

What corrective action might God have in mind for you today?

Reconciliation

Some years ago, I asked a Christian friend to write an article for me to use for one purpose, but I used it for another, although both purposes were for the glory of God. I was devastated when the friend vehemently reacted to what I had done. My first response was defensive; but, before trying to justify myself, I decided to give myself some time to cool off and to pray about the situation. As I did, I began to see things from my friend's point of view. The result was that I was able sincerely to ask for forgiveness and to begin to build some new bridges of relationship with him.

God calls us to a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:16-21), not only with himself but with each other. He wants us, in our relationships with others, to go further than forgiveness; he wants us in harmony with one another.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (v. 17). On the inside, Christians are brand new people. We have new life in the Holy Spirit. With that new life comes a continual flow of opportunities to live in a new way. God shows us, in Christ, how to be reconciled to him. He has forgiven our sins and is working to make us whole. In that process, he has shown us the way to reconciliation and the means of encouraging others to be reconciled to him and to one another. And, as we go about this ministry, we are ambassadors for Christ! What greater privilege could there be than to serve God in this way? And, he'll show us new and better ways to do it every day, if we just let him. Shine!

How might God use you as a minister of reconciliation in some situation you are concerned about?

Companionship

There are many spiritual blessings of being in a small group, and sometimes unexpected ones. Three other men and I were in such a group years ago when I faced a crisis in my ministry. Our ministry had been given a dump truck to send to Honduras at a time when that country was recovering from a devastating hurricane. When the truck arrived in Miami for shipment, however, it was in terrible condition. The last thing the people in Honduras needed was a broken-down truck. As I shared this with my group, one of the guys said, “I know a Christian in Miami who owns a trucking business; if the truck can be repaired, he’d be glad to put it into shape for shipment without any charge.” I called the man. “Would you believe I know about that truck,” he said, “and that I can see it in the parking area across the street right now?”

We Christians should never think that we are independent and don’t need the help of others. Nor should any of us be excused from helping others. The church, as the Body of Christ, can only be effective when its members work together for the common good.

Small group companionship is the ideal place within which to experience what the Body of Christ is all about (Matthew 18:20). In an intimate group Christians can be honest with one another. A level of trust can exist in which we can speak both “off the top of our heads” and “from the bottom of our hearts” and not feel judged. Not only will we get the encouragement and support we need for everyday living, but sometimes, through the ideas of others, we’ll be as surprised by God as I was in getting that truck fixed! If you’re not in a small group, consider the opportunities it provides to shine your light while also getting it re-charged.

What has been your experience in participating in a small group or groups?

Mature Thinking

Our conscience is like a barometer to measure our maturity in Christ. It helps us examine ourselves as to whether we show forth the marks of a child of God. Do we truly love our neighbor as ourselves? Do we keep the commandments of God? Does our lifestyle reflect our reverence for God so that people know that he is our priority?

As we look within ourselves, what do we see? We should see a person untroubled by our actions because they have been for a godly purpose. We should see a person who is at peace. We should find within us a soul that is alive to God, one who delights in him. A mature Christian is compassionate toward others and full of gentleness and patience.

As we mature spiritually we know within ourselves that, by the grace of God, we are following the pathway he has set for us. If Jesus is the Lord of our lives, our conscience informs us day by day the thoughts we should have and the things we should do. We have a God-given sense of satisfaction when we have shown love to our neighbor, honored our parents, and kept our body pure because it is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Conversely, our conscience convicts us when we have not. The testimony of our conscience is a work of the Spirit as we mature in Christ. And the clearer conscience we have, the brighter the light of Christ can shine through us.

Reflect on your conscience as a barometer of your love of Christ.

Vulnerability

Although an introvert, over the years my ministry has required that I do a lot of public speaking. One way I handle that is by beginning each talk with humor. It makes me feel more comfortable with the audience. A friend gave me a list of some of the amusingly awkward things people put on automobile accident reports, and they were a great “ice-breaker.” Then, someone else gave me what, unthinkingly, were equally funny things people said in asking for support from governmental agencies. I used them only once because my friend Mary had the courage to tell me I was making fun of uneducated, desperate people who were pleading for help.

Perhaps it’s too easy for us to harden our hearts to God (Isaiah 6:10) and to the ways he would reach us through others. Hardening our hearts means stubbornly setting ourselves against God and what he wants us to learn in the school of life. No matter how affluent a society we live in today, there are always those who are “down and out.” They are vulnerable, and we need to be sensitive to that, which I had not been in the illustration above.

Just as circumstances of life leave some people in a vulnerable condition, there is a way in which all Christians are to be vulnerable as well. We are to be vulnerable in the sense of being undefensively open to what God wants us to learn from the experiences of life so that Christ in us shines with a true light and not a false one. I thank God that, by his grace, I didn’t harden my heart to Mary’s courageous words as I had hardened it to those not-so-funny-after-all pleas from the poor.

Is there any heart-hardening going on in your life that might dull your light of Christ?

Power from on High

We Christians celebrate Christmas and Easter, but what about Pentecost (Acts 2), the day to celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church? By neglecting Pentecost, perhaps we also neglect the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Consider these thoughts taken from Maxie Dunnam's *The Workbook on Abiding in Christ*. The promise of Pentecost was primarily one of power. The thing that the non-Christian world sees lacking in Christians is the presence and power of God in our lives.

As Dunnam points out, "The New Testament teaches that we were promised fire, not a feeble flicker. We are to be like a city set on a hill, not a smoldering candle hidden under a bushel basket. We are to experience fulfillment for our hunger, the joy and radiance of a wedding feast, excitement like that of a man finding a treasure hidden in the field that leads him to sell everything to possess it." The power from on high is in Christians through the Holy Spirit; and we are to witness to that reality in every aspect of our lives.

Furthermore, Ephesians 4:30 warns us not to grieve the Holy Spirit, and 1 Thessalonians 5:19 says we are not to quench the Spirit. Dunnam notes that there is active and passive sin in relationship to the Holy Spirit. "We grieve the Holy Spirit by doing what he tells us *not to do*. We quench the Holy Spirit by refusing to do what he tells us *to do*." The light of Christ is to shine forth from us in power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Reflect on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life today.

God's Problems

How about a fresh way of looking at prayer? From the *New Living Translation* of the Bible, Psalm 27:7-8 says: "Hear me as I pray, O Lord. Be merciful and answer me! My heart has heard you say, 'come and talk with me.' And my heart responds, 'Lord, I am coming.'" Maxie Dunnam says, "What a beautiful expression of the very foundation of prayer."

Prayer is a natural part of human life. People who are not Christians and have no interest in being Christians still regularly comment on prayer: "I don't have a prayer of winning that contest"; "Pray that I'll be able to pass my exam"; "If all else fails, pray." And, in fact, many of those people actually pray, even if they would not think of it as such. Prayer just seems to be part of who we are. People spend a lot of time searching for meaning, and prayer is a way of doing that even if they don't know whom they are addressing in their prayers. For the Christian, as the psalm says, it is a heart response to God...a way of talking with him, at his invitation.

People who are serious about prayer ask questions about the sovereignty of God (why pray if God is going to do whatever he plans to do anyway?), the free will of people (do we pray against the will of others when we ask God to change them?), and the healings that don't seem to happen the way we pray. Dunnam says, "All the questions, objections, and contradictions surrounding prayer—and they are many and monumental—all of them are God's problems, not mine; because prayer is God's idea. God has commanded us to pray." Obediently honoring God is at the heart of being Christ in our world today. Shine!

Reflect on your prayer life and how it might be improved.

Building Memories

Some years ago my wife and I were in New York City for a meeting. There was a musical playing on Broadway that she very much wanted to see. Several people with us at the meeting were planning to go to the show, and we were invited to join them. However, when we learned the price of the tickets, I immediately said, “No.” As a result, although my wife was very understanding about my decision, while our friends were having a wonderful evening, we had a terrible one. But I learned an important lesson that night: there are times when a financial sacrifice is appropriate if it will build joyful memories for the ones you love.

The wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) was an instance in which Jesus had to make a sacrifice in order to build joyful memories for his mother and others. The incident occurred at the beginning of his ministry and at a time when he did not want to be seen simply as a miracle worker. Yet, he was in a tough situation. Apparently his mother had some responsibility in connection with the affair; and, when the crisis arose, she asked Jesus for help. He responded by turning the water into wine.

Some may wonder about Jesus being at a wedding—a purely social occasion—when he was just beginning the most important mission the world has ever known. But, are not social occasions a part of our mission? If God is going to use our light to shine in the lives of others, we need to be in contact with others. Jesus valued social occasions because they gave him opportunities to reach people. The work that God has for us to do can be accomplished in times of celebration as well as in other settings. And, people are open to one another in a special way at such times because they are times for building joyful memories.

What social occasions give you the opportunity to shine the light of Christ?

Hugs

Probably, we have all had the experience of hugging someone who really didn't want to be hugged. Sometimes it may be our loved one who is really angry with us, and to accept a hug would seem like forgiving us too easily. Or maybe it is someone who is offended by that type of intimacy or thinks it inappropriate to the situation. Or perhaps it is someone who just doesn't know us well enough to be able to accept our hug. Whatever the reason, it is an awkward experience. We have been vulnerable enough to offer the hug, and its rejection leaves us feeling unworthy or excluded or perhaps even ill-mannered.

The good news is that there is someone who always wants to hug us no matter how unworthy we may be. His name is God. That is what the story we call "The Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-32) is all about. When we think we can do things on our own, and don't need God, it is like resisting his hug. That is the picture of the younger brother who, as soon as he was of age, wanted to take his money and run. The warmth of his father's love was not enough to keep him at home. He had better things to do.

In the end, of course, he could find no satisfaction in his self-pleasing pursuits. Things that seem like "fun" for their own sake—in the anticipation and even in the execution—ultimately have no lasting satisfaction if they weren't the very thing the Lord wanted us to do. Fortunately, the son had the sense to return to the father and his awaiting hug. God the Father is always there awaiting us with the warmest possible welcome. Will you let him hug you today? I don't know about you, but that certainly makes my light shine.

Take a moment to let God hug you right now.

Interruptions Are Ministry Opportunities

As a person who has a compulsion to stay focused, interruptions have always been a problem for me. In contrast, writer-priest Henri Nouwen told this story from his days at Notre Dame. He was talking with a colleague who was a theology professor. The man said that his biggest problem had always been that interruptions interfered with his work at the most crucial times. He was able to deal with this only when he realized that those interruptions were his opportunities to show God's love to others in need. It's not that interruptions interfere with ministry, they are ministry!

Jesus demonstrated that truth in Luke 8:40-56. A man named Jairus interrupted him with the plea that he attend to his daughter who was dying; and then, on the journey to do so, Jesus is further interrupted by a woman with a bleeding problem. In neither instance did he turn the person away. Instead, he gave each person and situation the time and attention needed.

Interruptions are special opportunities to be Christ to the world around us. Jesus shows us how. In the case of the woman with the bleeding problem, he does more than serve as a source of healing. He knows that it is important for her to testify to what has happened to her. That reinforces her faith and witnesses God's healing power to those around her. In the situation with the young girl, he not only brings healing, but is concerned about the child's practical need for something to eat.

We all face interruptions, perhaps many times each day. What a liberating experience it is to quit grumbling about them and see them, instead, as opportunities to let Christ's light shine through us into the lives of others.

What is your attitude about interruptions, and how can you better be Christ in the midst of them?

Fasting

Some years ago, I was testing my vocation and decided to enter into a three-day fast for the Lord's guidance. By the third day, I was sensing the Lord's leading toward continuing in the work in which I was already engaged until he clearly gave me guidance in another direction. On that third day, when the mail arrived, there was a letter from a dear friend who had no idea that I was in the midst of a fast. He wanted me to know that, in thanksgiving for my ministry, he was in prayer and fasting for me. What confirmation!

Jesus, of course, is our example. Although not many of us will fast for 40 days as Jesus did immediately following his baptism (Matthew 4:1-11), there do come times in our lives when we may want to consider the benefits of fasting. For Jesus, this was the beginning of his ministry, and he needed preparation for what was ahead. That included intimacy with God the Father, as his course of action was set before him. It also gave him the foundation for resisting the temptations of Satan which he immediately encountered.

As a spiritual discipline, fasting fell on hard times for many years, and is just now beginning to re-gain a place among Christians. From time to time, religious and political leaders call for days of fasting and prayer as a means of showing the seriousness of a resolve or to deny funds to self that could be made available to the needy. Fasting takes our focus off ourselves and opens us to better communication from God, brightening the light of Christ in our lives. However, if we have not fasted before, skipping a meal or two is not likely to be harmful, but it is advisable to get some guidelines from a knowledgeable source before undertaking more serious fasting.

What has been your experience with fasting?

Prayer Is Action

When our friend called to ask for prayers for his wife and himself, I could hear the desperation in his voice. Not only was he worried about her physical condition, but he was not well himself. Perhaps the thing that weighed him down as much as anything else was that neither of them felt God's presence in their plight and they just didn't have the energy to pray.

Years ago, Helen Shoemaker wrote a book entitled *Prayer Is Action*. She wrote it at a time when the focus of many churches was almost entirely on the "social gospel," meeting people's physical and emotional needs. The point of her book was that prayer is also something we can *do* to meet human need.

Many people have trouble praying for themselves and others when they are ill. They just don't feel like doing anything, even praying. They become discouraged about their situation and impatient to begin feeling better. They don't sense God's presence and love.

For those of us whose friends are sick while we are well, this is our call to action. In James 5:13-16, we are told that those who are sick should call upon their brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for them. Christians are a part of a community of faith. We have not only the privilege but also the obligation to pray for those who are sick, and we have the comfort of knowing that we can expect their prayers when we are ill. That's a light that shines in both directions.

For whom do you especially need to be praying today?

God's Hidden Presence

Jesus is always with us, but often we are not conscious of it. The experience of Jesus' hidden presence is perhaps common to us all. The ministry of Mother Teresa of Calcutta was so effective because she saw, in all the sick and dying to whom she ministered, the hidden presence of Jesus. In his Parable of the Last Judgment Jesus said, "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me'" (Matthew 25:40). Our Lord Jesus wants us to be looking for his hidden presence in the people and circumstances that we encounter in the natural course of our daily lives.

But there is another facet of our lives as Christians having to do with Jesus' hidden presence. It is when we feel separated from him, when our prayers seem to bounce off the ceiling, and we sense no relief from the troubles we are in. We may remind ourselves that Jesus loves us and promises to be with us, but where is he? We know God is with us through his indwelling Holy Spirit and within the Body of Christ, the community of faith of which we are a part, but it sometimes doesn't seem like it.

Henry T. Blackaby said this: "You can respond to the silence of God in two ways. One response is for you to go into depression, a sense of guilt, and self-condemnation. The other response is to have an expectation that God is about to bring you into a deeper knowledge of himself." Needless to say, the latter is better. The end result will be a Christian who is more available to God in the future.

How have you dealt with times of God's hidden presence?

God's Felt Presence

It is a common experience of Christians to feel God's presence in the reading and study of Scripture. When a particular passage speaks directly to our heart concerning some issue on our minds, we can get that warm glow of understanding that is a gift of God. Sometimes the words of Scripture will literally "jump off the page" as we seek the Lord's guidance. When we are "down" and need spiritual uplifting, the reading of a psalm or other beautiful passage of Scripture can warm our hearts (Luke 24:32), lift our spirits and remind us of God's love.

Prayer, of course, can also open the door to the felt presence of God. People who practice meditation and contemplation do so because it brings them into the felt presence of God. That is largely what those prayer experiences are all about. But even our simple prayers of adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession and petition can connect us with God in such a way that we perceive his presence with us. John Bunyan said, "When thou prayest, rather let thy heart be without words than thy words without heart." Concerning the attitude with which we come to prayer, Father Andrew wrote: "Let us seek so to prepare our souls that the Lord entering may find a place prepared for him." And Larry Christenson said, "Prayer is a not a pious exercise. It is doing serious and significant business with God." If our heart is in the right place, God can make his presence felt in prayer. Going forth in his presence and in the power of the Holy Spirit is where the light-bearer wants to be.

Are you feeling God's presence in the course of reading this book? Why or why not?

God's Revealed Presence

Christians today sometimes experience *Shekinah* glory moments when Jesus breaks through to us in some remarkable way. We probably wouldn't be able to stand much of that, but it does happen from time to time. Moses had to shield his face after being with God when receiving the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:29-35). His face was so radiant that the Israelites were afraid to come near him. The Transfiguration of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-13) would have been another instance of *Shekinah* glory in the Bible, and left Peter mystified.

The glory of God is well stated in this brief summary from the *Disciple's Study Bible*: "God is both transcendent and immanent. He towers over us as supreme Lord, and yet He is very close as He stoops down to make Himself known to us. In His sovereignty and holiness He is exalted far above us, but in His love He draws very near to us."

For some people, when they accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior may have been a moment of the revealed presence of the Lord if it were particularly dramatic in nature or very deeply moving. For others, these "mountaintop" experiences may occur at Christian conferences or retreats when God breaks through in some astounding way. One of mine happened at a Christian coffee house when the words to a praise song gave me a strong sense that I was already living in eternity, something that had never occurred to me before, and literally brought me to my knees. God's glory is enough to cause us to fall on our knees in awe and praise; and, at the same time, it can be like a searchlight exposing us for who we are in all our fallenness and filling us with a desire to become whole and clean (Isaiah 6: 1-8; Luke 5:1-11). We should cherish our moments of God's revealed presence, and we should recall them when we are faced with doubt. They are part of the equipment we carry as people who are the light of Christ.

Reflect on the most glorious experience of God in your life. Share it with someone if you can.

Moving Mountains

Have you moved any mountains lately? Jesus said, “If you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there’ and it will move” (Matthew 17:20). Here we have Jesus using exaggeration in order to get the attention of his audience. Jesus wants his followers not only to have faith, but also to show that they have faith by doing something with it. Jesus is saying, show your faith by stepping out boldly for the Lord. Faith isn’t some fond wish, it is trusting in God despite opposition and discouragement; it is moving forward into the unknown because you believe that is where God wants you to go, and he will go there with you.

Hebrews 11 is about the heroes of the faith who did great things for God. We find them in the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, and David, for instance. But the author of Hebrews goes on to say that there are nameless heroes who remained faithful to God despite hardships, persecution and torture. On reflection, we can probably name many in more modern times whose faith has led them to great sacrifice, even martyrdom.

These heroes and heroines of the faith may not have moved any physical mountains, but they have figuratively moved mountains of ignorance, poverty, prejudice and injustice. For example, Harriet Beecher Stowe, by having the faith to write *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, did more to bring an end to slavery in this country than perhaps any other individual. Now that is moving a mountain!

How would you rate your mountain moving faith? God will use all of us to do great things for him if we let him. They may not seem great at the time, just small obediences, but the light of Christ will shine through every one of them.

What mountain does God want you to move today?

Moses Is Dead

For those of us who have been Christians for a long time, we may sometimes forget that we are new people. Maxie Dunnam makes this point in his book *The Workbook on Abiding in Christ*. He began by quoting Joshua 1:1-5. It notes that Moses has died and then the Lord gives Joshua his “marching orders” to cross the Jordan and claim the Promised Land. In the course of those instructions, God not only tells Joshua what he is to do, but also assures Joshua that he will be with him. Dunnam says that the quoted verses contain two important lessons: “(1) Claim God’s will for your life, and (2) Claim God’s presence and power for your daily living.”

The primary point I want to pick up on is that if we are going to do God’s will and be in God’s presence and power, we have to follow Joshua’s example of accepting the fact that Moses was dead and now it was time for him to accept the responsibility that was his alone. We have to bury our own “Moses” and have any number of other funerals...burying our resentments, frustrations, guilt, shame, regrets, fears, or whatever. “There are things within us that must die if we are going to live,” says Dunnam.

The Apostle Paul tells us: “Anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!” (2 Corinthians 5:17) Do we believe that of ourselves? If so, let’s bury Moses and get on with this new life of being the light of Christ in our world.

What do you need to put behind you so that you can get on with life?

Too Busy?

We live in a world that makes impossible demands on the time of most people. When is there time to pray? Yet, what would we think of a person who had no time to eat or sleep? Surely we would tell that person that taking care of the essentials of health is time well spent. If our health breaks down because we haven't taken care of ourselves, what good are we to God or anyone else? Furthermore, our spiritual health is even more important than our physical health. If we can find time to take care of our bodily needs, can't we find time for our eternal needs?

God is good and has made us keenly aware of his love for us (1 John 4:8). Surely he would not, by causing our lives to be too busy, deprive us of the opportunity to be with him in prayer. We simply need to rescue that half hour in the morning or evening of quiet time. Likewise, we need to make good use of chance moments when waiting for someone, when going from one place to another, or otherwise when we are alone and have no compelling action to be taken at that moment. Such times are opportunities to lift our hearts to God and thereby gain fresh strength for what lies ahead.

The less time we have, the better stewards of it we need to be. If we put off our prayer time in hopes that there will be more time later we run the risk of that illusory time never coming. Our vocational work normally requires continuity of action. Our work of prayer does not. Any time is a satisfactory moment for prayer. When we combine that quiet period we set aside for God each day with quick, short prayers of praise, thanksgiving and pleas for help during the course of the day, we have the opportunity to grow in his grace and knowledge all day long. The results will be reflected in our effectiveness as light-bearers.

To what extent have you been using busyness as an excuse not to spend time with God?

New Every Day

God is teaching us all the time. In Matthew's Gospel, between the telling of the Parable of the Sower and its explanation (13:10-17), we have this insight into how Matthew understood Jesus' teaching by way of parables; and it also gives us another framework into which we can ponder the parable itself. The disciples wanted to know why Jesus taught in parables because many people apparently could not understand them. Jesus seems to respond to them by saying that that is the very point.

For Matthew, Jesus taught in parables (which both illustrated religious principles and often drew the hearer into a deeper understanding of what the kingdom of God is all about) to separate those who wanted to hear and understand from those who did not. They confirmed the blindness and hardness of heart of the scribes, Pharisees and others who did not have "ears to hear" while revealing to the disciples the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

As we then reflect back on the parable itself, here is another way to look at it. Each time we receive a Christian teaching, an insight from Scripture, or a word from the Lord through prayer, it is a new sowing of seeds intended to nourish, enlighten or inspire us. Will it fall on the pathway for us and go unnoticed? Will it land on rocky ground and give us a "quick fix" of excitement but soon be forgotten? Will it drop among the thistles and begin to grow, only to be choked by our earthly concerns? Or will it, in fact, be pondered deeply within us, nourished by our desire to grow in our relationship with the Lord, flourish and bear mighty fruit? It depends, doesn't it, upon our continuing desire to be in the will of God in all that we do. Every day is a new day to learn and grow if we want the light of Christ to shine through us to others.

Look for the new thing that God wants to show you today.

God as Father

In our community, the ministry of providing food and other resources to those in need is called Papa's Pantry. Papa is God.

Many ignore God, or pay little attention to him. Others, not knowing him but conscious of his power over mankind, are fearful of him. Yet Jesus showed us that, in a most intimate way, he is our Father. Whatever relationship we have, or had, with our earthly father, he or others have modeled for us—at least to some extent—how wonderful a father can be. Thus Jesus, when telling us how to pray with godly boldness, says to address our God as Father. Calling him “Father” results in a connectedness with him that no other name for him in Scripture can give us.

To call God by so intimate a title was rare in the Old Testament; but, in the New Testament, he is called by this name more than any other, both by Jesus Christ himself and by the apostles afterward (Matthew 6:9). Indeed, Jesus made this name common among his followers, and he taught them to use it in their prayers, their teaching and their writings. For them, it best expressed the nature of their relationship with God; it made him more real to them and someone with whom they could have communion at the deep level they had experienced with their own earthly fathers.

Knowing him as Father gives the children of God the boldness to pray for great things. Jesus even referred to God the Father as *Abba* (Mark 14:36), the intimate way in which Jewish children addressed their fathers. As Maxie Dunnam says, “It was like calling God ‘Daddy’ or ‘Papa.’ *This is not only unprecedented in Judaism but in all the world’s great religions.*” (emphasis mine). Those who would be Christ to their world have the boldness to pray to *Abba* for great things.

What is your “Abba” relationship with God?

Total Commitment

Many years ago I taught a course in our adult Sunday school class on “Total Commitment,” and was accused by some of radical Christian beliefs. Later, when I learned that the word “radical” comes from the word “root”, I knew I was on the right tract. Total commitment is rooted in Christianity itself.

We are not called to follow Jesus in some ways but to ignore him in others. Once we commit our lives to him, it is to be a life of total commitment. We are not to segment our time between the sacred and the secular. We are not to do some things in the manner we believe Jesus would approve and then live the rest of our lives according to our own selfish desires. We are not to walk with one foot in heaven and the other in hell. It is only in being faithful in small ways that God can entrust us with his kingdom (Matthew 13:31-32).

Christ must be helpful to us in every way or he is helpful in none. We are to look to him, through the inner guidance of the Holy Spirit and the enlightenment of Scripture, that we may come to understand his way for us each step along the pathway of life. If we cannot trust him with the small things of our life, how can we trust him with all of it? We show that trust by our small acts of obedience.

Likewise, we are to accept Christ for all that he is. He is our Savior *and* Lord. He cannot be one without the other. We cannot expect him to save us if we are not willing to follow him as Lord. God glories in our salvation, but he also glories in our labor on his behalf, of our gifts and abilities in bringing others to Christ that he might be Savior and Lord of all.

What does it mean to you that Jesus is Lord of your life?

The Aroma of Christ

A colorful picture of a garden may be a beautiful work of art, but that is all it is. As John Bunyan pointed out, it has no life of its own. It cannot reproduce. It is like a person who, though made in the image of God, has no inclination to love and serve God.

By contrast, consider the joy God experiences in looking at a live garden, each portion bearing fruit according to its ability. God does not call a rose bush to be a mighty oak tree, but he does rejoice in the beauty of the rose. Likewise, he does not expect the oak tree to produce apples, or the morning glory to produce grapes. Each plant in God's garden has its ability to produce what he designed it to do. In harmony, the plants, vines, shrubs, flowers and trees glorify God as they accomplish that for which God created them.

Likewise, Christians who do the work God has given them to do, according to the gifts he has given them and the abilities they have, are to God an even more beautiful garden than the one of flowers and trees. When they stand and grow where the Gardener has planted them, they honor both the garden in which they are planted and the Gardener. Their fruit is their glory. And, considering that the stock from which the Christian's fruit grows is of Christ the eternal vine ("I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener," John 15:1), an abundance of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) can be expected. A painted flower has no smell, but the faithful Christian is to God the aroma of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:15).

Reflect on being the aroma of Christ to those around you.

Consecrating Our Space

You think you have it hard? Reflect on all that the Apostle Paul endured for Christ's sake. He was scourged, stoned, shipwrecked, and imprisoned just to name a few of his troubles. And in addition to all of those things, he daily faced the pressure of his responsibility for the churches he was planting. We will not likely have to face anything like the challenges that confronted Paul, but we all have this in common with him: we are to glorify God in what comes upon us daily (Romans 15:5-6).

Our lives may involve more boredom than danger. We may have to deal with apathy rather than antagonism. Our spouse or our children may cause us daily concerns that Paul could not have imagined. The pace of our lives and the constant pressures of adapting to radical technological changes would have been incomprehensible to those who lived in biblical times. Yet, for all the differences between Paul's life and ours, between Paul's world and ours, we, like Paul, should aim at the consecration of our space that we may see the splendor of God in our ordinary day.

The consecration of our space and of our day is dependent on the extent to which we offer them to God. That means being open to God at every opportunity. It means trying to be obedient to his will in our lives when we sometimes are not sure what his will may be. It means trying to be Christ's person in our contacts with others. When all else fails, it means remembering to smile a lot. A single smile can create an avalanche of good will and bring glory to someone's otherwise miserable day. The light of Christ within us can be manifested by a genuine smile.

In what way or ways are you opening your life to God?

The Appropriate Virtue

As we sat around the dinner table at a social event with people we did not know, the question was soon asked, “What do you do?”...meaning, of course, what vocation we pursue. I have a friend who would have replied, “I follow Jesus; whom do you follow?”

Every Christian has the vocation of making friends for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17-20); and, in doing so, we are to represent our Lord in those particular circumstances in which we find ourselves just as Christ would have done in his human nature in the circumstances of his time. In considering our role in this ministry, it is important to consider that in every condition of life there is a certain virtue appropriate to that condition.

If we have been blessed with an abundance of material wealth, there are two virtues appropriate to that condition. One is wisdom in the use of our resources and the other is grateful generosity to those less fortunate. If, on the other hand, life has dealt us adversity, we are called to the higher virtues of courage and perseverance. If our life is one of routine and monotonous duty, the virtue of patience is what we should seek. In times of spiritual darkness there is the opportunity to develop the virtues of hope and faith. If life is a training ground for eternity, it is natural that we should face a variety of challenges through which we have the opportunity to develop appropriate virtues.

Through it all, there is one thing more than any other that we want to manifest itself. It is what bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things. For those who bear the light of Christ, love is the appropriate virtue for every occasion (1 Corinthians 13).

Reflect on the virtue of love in your life.

Refreshed

Sometimes we are refreshed from a worship service but not refreshed for taking out the trash! Oswald Chambers had that inspired thought!

Being born again of the Holy Spirit is an unmistakable work of God, as mysterious as the wind and as surprising as God himself (John 3:8). Being born from above is refreshing to us all the time, in our thinking, our talking, our very living, because it is the continual surprise of our life in God. Staleness, on the other hand, indicates that something is out of place in our relationship with God. When we grit our teeth and tackle a matter just because it needs to be done, that is the first sign of staleness. Are we refreshed by the Holy Spirit at this moment or are we stale, regretting that there is something to be done? Freshness does not come from obedience but from the Holy Spirit; but obedience prompted by the Spirit is refreshing, not stale.

Our relationship with God is the key. We are to be one with Jesus. If we keep our lives continually open to Jesus Christ, never pretending with him, we can be refreshed. If we are relying on any other source than God himself, we will not know when he is with us and when he is not.

Being born of the Holy Spirit means much more than we generally take it to mean. It gives us a new vision and the opportunity to be refreshed for whatever challenge we may face. Let the Holy Spirit refresh you for the challenges of the day. Shine!

Think of an instance in which the Holy Spirit refreshed you to do what otherwise would have been a difficult or tedious task.

Abandoned to God

If human love does not go beyond itself, it is not real love. In another insight from Oswald Chambers, we are told that if our love is always proper, wise, sensible and calculating—never going beyond itself—it is not real love. It may be affection and give us a warm feeling, but that is not the true nature of love.

It is when we have been carried away to do something that God would have us do—not because it is our duty, nor because it is useful, nor because there is anything in it other than the sheer love of God—that we are showing the love that God intends of us. In this manner, we can bring to God things that are of value to him rather than just searching around for any number of things we might be doing. God is not calling us to great accomplishments but simple, ordinary things that will evidence our abandonment to him. These are things like what Mary of Bethany did in washing the feet of Jesus, greatly valued by him (Matthew 26:6-13).

There are times when it seems as if God waits to see if we will offer him tokens of our abandonment that reflect how genuinely we love him. Abandonment to God is of more value than personal holiness. Personal holiness focuses on ourselves; it shows concern for how we talk and act, fearful that we will offend him. Perfect love casts out all of that (1 John 4:18) when we are once abandoned to God. Our focus should not be on our usefulness to God. It is not a question of being of use but of being of value to God. It is when we are abandoned to him that he can work through us to accomplish his divine purposes like being the light of Christ in the world.

What does abandonment to God mean to you? Think of an illustration.

The Piercing Question

If he needs to, God will break us in order to re-make us in his image. In reply to Jesus' question, "Simon son of John, do you truly love me more than these?" (John 21:15), Peter professes his love of Jesus. But the love he has in mind is a fraternal one. Peter loved Jesus in the way in which any natural person loves another. It is a feeling kind of love that does not touch the center of the person expressing it. Jesus calls us to a deeper love. Jesus said, "I tell you, whoever acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man will also acknowledge before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8). He is saying that we are to acknowledge our love of him not merely in words but by everything we do.

Oswald Chambers says that the point is that God wants to expose every deception within us; otherwise, the word of God is not fully effective within us. The word of God pierces us in a way that no sin ever can. Keith Miller liked to say, "Advice people listen to; pain they obey." The Bible states it this way: "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates [pierces] even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). That's pain! There is no room for deception. There is no possibility of being philosophical when the Lord speaks directly to us about our deception. The pain is too great.

Such piercing pain makes all else insignificant by comparison. We know when the Lord's word has been spoken to us in this manner. But the point of the pain is the hope of our redemption. It's all part of the growing process that we might be of greater value to the Lord.

When was the last time you were pierced by the word of God?

Responsibility *for* God?

Can you accept your responsibility for God? Dag Hammarskjöld is important to me because his book *Markings* inspired my first book *A Gift of Light*. He was Secretary General of the United Nations and a Christian. A very introspective man, just before a very important meeting, he wrote in his journal: “Your responsibility is indeed terrifying. If you fail, it is God, thanks to your having betrayed him, who will fail mankind. You fancy you can be responsible to God, can you carry the responsibility *for* God?”

What a mind-boggling thought! It is common of us to think of our many responsibilities *to* God (Luke 14:25-35), but responsibility *for* God is another thing altogether. Yet, as C. S. Lewis has said, “The Church exists for nothing else but to draw people into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time.” If that is the primary mission of the Church, then what is the mission of those of us who are “little Christs”? What if the Church, and we individually, fail in our obligations to mankind and betray God by doing so?

We have this little light, and we had better let it shine!

How do you understand the concept of responsibility for God?

God's Plan for Your Life

Have you found your place in God's heart? During the period of the Jewish exile synagogues were established as places of worship, and these continued to exist following the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus, it was the logical place for Jesus to appear on the Sabbath. In Luke 4:16-21, he reads from the prophet Isaiah concerning the future Messianic age and boldly announces, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus knew God's plan for his life. The Holy Spirit was on him to preach the Good News of the kingdom, to free people from the captivity of sin, to work miracles, and to let them know that a new age had come. As we ponder this message, we might ask what it has to do with us. The answer: God had a plan for Jesus' life and he has a plan for each of us.

God created each of us in a special way. He has a personal interest in each one of us. He loves you as if you were the only person in the world. As Maxie Dunnam has so beautifully expressed it, "There is a place in God's heart that only you can fill." Because he loves you so much it is impossible to imagine that he put you in the world without having in mind a purpose for your life. The responsibility that each of us has is to discover the role assigned to us by God. How do we do that? By consulting the Holy Spirit within us and asking, "What do I do that gives me the sense of purpose, the joy of the abundant life (John 10:10), that God wants for me?" Another approach is to ask, "What, Lord, did you put me on this earth to do?" Thank God, Jesus knew his purpose in life, and the world has been greatly blessed as a result. The world will also be blessed by your fulfilling God's purpose for you.

What is God's plan for your life?

Extension Cords

“Are all those cords necessary?” is a question my wife asks when she is concerned about the dust around all of my electronic equipment. It might lead one to reflect on extension cords. In Acts 2:1-12 (Pentecost), Jesus’ disciples were gathered together when something that sounded like a violent wind swept into the room and tongues of fire rested on each of them. They began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. The words they spoke were familiar to people from various places who heard God being praised in their own language.

This event is considered to be the birth of the Christian Church. Jesus had promised the Holy Spirit (John 14:15-21). The regenerating power of the Spirit came on the disciples just before his ascension (John 20:22) and was then poured out on all believers at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit would exist within the Body of Christ (the Church) and within individual Christians. He would provide guidance, comfort, wisdom, understanding, empowerment, conviction...and all the other things that Jesus could have provided if he had remained present with us. From this point forward, Christians had all we would need to represent Christ, to be his ambassadors, to be Christ to the world around us.

Ponder this. We Christians are like extension cords for God...plugged into the Power Source and connected with other people on behalf of God. Jesus talked about vine and branches, he being the vine and we being the branches (John 15:1-5). He said that if we remain in him we will bear much fruit. Just as we, as branches, connect with the vine that is Jesus, the Holy Spirit allows us to be like extension cords connected to God. This is, of course, a wonderful and joyful thing for us; but, it is not primarily for us but so that we may manifest God’s love to those around us. By the grace of God, and in the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to do so. Shine!

How well are you working as an extension cord?

In the Marketplace

How much time do you spend in the “marketplace”? Our friend Victor Oliver says, “The people of Israel were called to mirror the redemptive actions and thoughts of God to the nations around them. They were to demonstrate that his presence was among them and his power active in their ongoing journey. The Christian Church and the individual believer are to do and be the same.” Jesus said, “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14-16).

“Ministry for us is the presence of God with us and in us as we live out our lives in the marketplace,” Oliver contends. “That is the place, after all, where we spend most of our time. Wherever we are, there the presence and power will be if we are obedient and actively submissive to God. We are not called to be ‘in’ the church; we are called to be ‘in’ the marketplace. That is where evangelism and discipling should occur.”

Oliver’s point is that Christians tend to think of evangelism in terms of inviting someone to church. In fact, statistics show that most people who have become Christians say they did so because someone invited them to church; but few people simply give their lives to Christ because they showed up in church one day. Their willingness to come to a worship service or other event at a church has undoubtedly been motivated by experiences they have had with Christians in the marketplace. In other words, attending church does not make a person a Christian. Perceiving the light of Christ in other people is what opens a person to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior...and this happens most frequently in the marketplace.

Reflect on an experience of Christ you have had in the marketplace.

Thistles

Our lives can so easily become an entanglement of thistles. In James 1:22-25, the brother of Jesus and leader of the Church in Jerusalem, was writing to first-century Christians who lived outside of the Holy Land, teaching them about proper Christian behavior. He tells them (and us) that we are not only to listen to the word of God, we are to do what it says. It's a matter of obedience. We are blessed when we look clearly at the perfect law of God and not only remember what we have seen but obey what it tells us.

James is saying that we can measure the effectiveness of our Bible study by the extent to which it changes our habits, attitudes and lifestyle. To what extent do we put into action what we have studied? There are thistles (Matthew 13: 22) out there that want to choke the word out of us by the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for things we don't really need.

Concerning the worries of life, the world tells us to take care of ourselves; no one else will. But God's word says, "Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers" (Philippians 4:6). As to the deceitfulness of wealth, the world tells us that wealth brings security, power and happiness. But God's word says, "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). Concerning the desire for things we don't need, the world tells us to indulge ourselves and get all we can. But the word of God says, "Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature" (Romans 13:14). The light of Christ shines much brighter than anything the world can give us.

How do you avoid the thistles you face in life?

Two Kinds of Multiplication

In Matthew 13:31-32, Jesus is trying to explain what the kingdom of God (or, of heaven, in Matthew) is all about. The mustard seed, according to Jesus, is the smallest of all seeds. Yet it can grow into a very large plant, even a tree in which birds can perch in its branches.

The mustard seed is not the smallest of seeds; but, in Jesus' time, it was proverbial for smallness. And, in Israel, it can grow into the size of a tree. William Barclay says this of the parable: "The Kingdom of Heaven starts from the smallest beginnings, but no one knows where it will end. In eastern language and in the Old Testament itself one of the commonest pictures of a great empire is the picture of a great tree, and subject nations are depicted as birds finding rest and shelter within its branches (Ezekiel 31:6). So, this parable tells us that the Kingdom of Heaven begins from the smallest of beginnings, but that in the end many nations will be gathered within it."

The Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15), of course, also speaks of phenomenal growth among the seeds that fall on good soil. There are at least two ways in which this multiplication happens. Each seed produces fruit for the benefit of others; the word of God is spread by this multiplication process as we share the word with others. But there is another way in which it multiplies, and that is in the life of the one in which the seed is firmly rooted in the first place. Once a truth of the word of God has gotten planted in our hearts and minds, it will guide us each time we face a situation in which that truth applies. Thus, the one seed will produce manifold fruit in our own lives as well as in the lives of those with whom we share it. This is how the light of Christ can shine into our lives and out to others as well.

Think of the seeds of truth that God has planted in your heart that you live by day after day.

An Accessible God

Chandu Ray is credited with taking the Bible across the Himalayas to the Tibetan people. A Pakistani, Ray had first sought God as a Hindu, but found no access to God through that religion. So then he sought God through Islam and found only rules and regulations but no access to God. His third option was reading the Bible, but he did not understand what he had read until he met a Christian missionary. In the course of their relationship, the missionary shared with Ray that he was losing his sight, and Ray wondered why he hadn't prayed about it. It seemed to Ray, from his reading of the Bible, that Jesus healed people. The missionary asked Ray to pray for him, the man was healed, and Ray became a Christian.

The point is simply this: we have an accessible God (James 4:8). A Jewish friend recently said to me, "I believe the same things you do about God's love, his care for us, and an afterlife with him; it's just that you believe you are in communication with him and that's just too far for me to go." What a shame! What a blessing people are missing who do not know that, through Christ, they can have access to God.

As a bearer of the light of Christ, this is a message you have. Let the light of that blessing shine through you to a dark world. Let others see how blessed you are to be a child of God with a heavenly Father with whom you are in communication through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within you.

How accessible do you believe that God is to you?

Spiritual Gifts

We looked earlier at how God can equip an individual for ministry through a crucial experience of life. But other ministry is done through spiritual gifts from God: teaching, encouragement, mercy, helps, administration, giving, leadership, evangelism, discernment, faith, healing, intercessions and hospitality. These are gifts of the Holy Spirit to equip us for service, spiritual gifts for ministry to others.

All Christians are called by God to participate in the ministry of Christ. All ministry is his ministry. That which we call “our ministry” is, more accurately, our role in his ministry. For too long, the term “minister” has been understood to be only those ordained. When Paul outlined the gifts for ministry, he was not talking about the ordained ministry. He was talking about the gifts that God provides to all Christians to do his work in the world.

As Christ’s people, we need to know our gifts and put them into operation so that Christ’s ministry may be made manifest in a world desperately in need of the benefit of those gifts. Some of those gifts are listed in Romans 12. You might also want to check 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 for other lists. We are the Body of Christ, engifted to serve one another and those in our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and elsewhere. We will find that we are blessed by using our spiritual gifts and others will be blessed by benefiting from them. There are few more effective ways of letting the light of Christ shine through us than in ministering in his name.

What are your spiritual gifts? How are you using them?

Fruit Inspection

We not only have gifts of the Holy Spirit to equip us for ministry, but fruit of the Spirit manifested in our life in Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Jesus said, “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit” (Matthew 12:33). Perhaps it’s time for a little “fruit inspection” of ourselves; the light of Christ will shine more brightly in our lives if we are bearing good fruit.

If we live by the Spirit, we will bear the fruit of the Spirit. If what we really want in our lives is the fruit, we can know that we are being guided by the Holy Spirit. We are being led by the Spirit when we want to hear and are ready to obey God’s word, and have the sensitivity to discern between our own selfish desires and God’s best for us. We should live in such a way that the Holy Spirit can guide our pathway one step at a time.

If we are honest about it, there is nonetheless a war going on within us. Our innate selfishness gets in the way of our spiritual growth. So, it’s a good time to take stock of the fruit we can see growing in our lives. Do we have joy, are we at peace, is patience an asset we have, are we kind and good and gentle and self-controlled, do we remain faithful? If so, know that the Holy Spirit is in control and we are blessed to be a blessing.

How about taking a few moments to do some fruit inspection of yourself?

Blessing Others

An ancient blessing of God's people in the Old Testament (Numbers 6:24-26) became very popular in Christian churches following the Reformation. Particularly significant is the reference to God's "face." The face of God is the source of light. While turning his face away from someone would be a sign of God's displeasure, his turning his face (and his countenance, which means the same thing) toward someone is a sign of God's pleasure in the company of the one on whom it shines. Likewise, the "peace" of God as used in this passage means the very best for that person in this life and the life to come.

God gave Moses these words as instructions concerning how the sons of Aaron (the Jewish priesthood) were to bless the people, but those same words can be used by all of us today. As light-bearers, it is our responsibility to encourage a deep love of God within our homes. It is especially important to be able to convey to our children that which is primary in our lives, namely our love of God. One of the simplest and most effective ways to help our children know and love God is to pray a blessing on them daily with the laying on of hands. This gives them a regular and concrete encounter with God's power and protection.

If we have children in the home, each night before bedtime is an opportunity to lay hands on them and pray the blessing of Numbers 6:24-26, adding the child's name and any special ways in which we want that child blessed at that time. If the child is having trouble sleeping, facing an exam at school, or whatever, seeking God's blessing in that particular matter is an appropriate addition to the prayer. Yet, even if our children are grown and far away from us, we can still pray a blessing on them and all of our loved ones each day.

If you have not made it a practice of blessing your loved ones in this manner, give it a try.

The Beginning of Wisdom

At this point in our journey into how we can best shine the light of Christ into a dark world, it may be time to consider some sort of self-improvement ideas, and wisdom seems to be a good starting point.

Wisdom begins by trusting in the Lord rather than leaning on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-8). God knows what is best for us. When we are faced with a decision, making it in accordance with his will is the priority. We come to know God's will by our study of Scripture and applying what we receive from God to our everyday lives.

How about examining our priorities, values and lifestyle? What is really important to us? What areas of our life have we failed to open to God? In what areas do we, instead, seek to be wise in our own eyes? The key is always to be open to correction by God, and God's correction sometimes comes through the words and actions of other people. Too often we want to be right at the expense of the thoughts and feelings of others. We're wise in our own eyes and that's good enough for us! God, on the other hand, wants us to be teachable and reasonable in our relationship with others.

If we step on someone else's point of view, we may miss learning something that God would like to teach us through the other person. Moreover, we tend to alienate others when we insist on being right all the time. We think we will feel better by putting the other person down. In truth we may come across as self-righteous and cause the other person to no longer like us or at least to become defensive toward us. It's better to trust in the Lord with all our heart and to be loving in our interpersonal relationships.

How are you doing in your interpersonal relationships? How might you do better?

Are We Sweating the Small Stuff?

If we want to be light-bearers, let's quit letting the small issues that bother us get in the way of what is really important. That was a point made by Richard Carlson in his book *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff*. He notes that we get bogged down with matters that really aren't that important and allow them to dominate our lives rather than enjoying this life God has given us.

An example would be other people's driving habits that could well be driving us crazy. This could be the guy who seems to be riding on our back bumper because he wants us to go faster when we want to obey the speed limit, or the guy who cuts in front of us in traffic. My problem is with people who don't go right on red or sit at the traffic light after it turns green because they are talking on their cell phone and are oblivious to other drivers. Can't we just let these people be who they are? We don't know what's going on in their lives; we probably wouldn't want to change places with them if we knew.

And there are a multitude of other things that we can let bother us but shouldn't. As Carlson says, "Whether we had to wait in line, listen to unfair criticism, or do the lion's share of the work, it pays enormous dividends if we learn not to worry about the little things." What difference do these things make? We are playing life to an audience of One. And that One tells us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

So, let's quit sweating the small stuff and get on with life. When we decide that is what we are going to do, we'll find that we have far more energy and enthusiasm and we'll be much kinder to and understanding of others. It's a part of the abundant life promised us by Jesus (John 10:10).

What small stuff are you sweating? How about letting it go?

What to Do When Things Aren't Great

Sooner or later we find ourselves agreeing with that age-old truth: life isn't fair. Things don't always go our way no matter how much we love the Lord, and it is easy to look around us and see that many people have tougher situations to handle than we do. Sometimes we're feeling sorry for ourselves; at other times we are distraught on behalf of others. What are we to make of all of this?

The fact is that this life is not an end in itself. It's a training ground for eternity. If we are going to learn all that God has to teach us in this life, we had better be prepared for how he may do it (Hebrews 12:7). Discipline isn't a pleasant word. We don't like it, particularly when applied to ourselves. Discipline is, however, the way we can be taught and trained; it's what the word means. As has been well said, "God loves us just as we are, but he doesn't want us to stay that way." If we are going to learn the difference between right and wrong, God's loving discipline will show us the way.

When we get to feeling that life isn't fair, instead of feeling sorry for ourselves, it is time to see what God is trying to teach us. Sometimes the problem we face is the result of our own bad decisions or wrong actions. If that is the case and we don't get the message, God may well use guilt, crises or another problem to get our attention. Of course, sometimes the matter to be dealt with is not the result of anything we have done. In that case, our response should be patience, trusting in the Lord to show us what to do.

There is also the situation in which the unfairness of life has not fallen on us but on others we know and love. This is our opportunity to show compassion to them as they work through their crisis. That is much more productive than pity, a self-defeating emotion that does nothing for anyone. Compassion, on the other hand, is a heartfelt emotion that can energize and lead to constructive action. The discipline the Lord may be showing us in such situations is to get off the sidelines and get into the game.

How do you deal with things when they aren't great?

Do Good

The good we do to our neighbor (Proverbs 3:27-28) is often of a reciprocal nature. We share with our neighbor the teaspoon of cinnamon she needs for a recipe. Our neighbor shares with us his leaf blower when we are cleaning our yard. These are the everyday sort of things that build good relationships. It is normal for us to be eager to do good because that not only builds trust with those with whom we share, but also makes us feel good for its own sake.

There are other means of carrying out acts of kindness that have their own reward. My wife and I, for example, drive weekly for Meals on Wheels. The people to whom we make deliveries appreciate our effort, and there is general approval by others who know we do it. Our joy comes from knowing that it is the love of Jesus within us that impels us to perform this ministry. Multitudes of Christians are engaged in a wide variety of ministries every day under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is an even more rewarding way of doing good for someone else, and that is doing it anonymously. There is something very special about doing something thoughtful for another but never letting them know that we were the giver nor ever mentioning it to anyone else. When people know the good things we have done, the purity of the act is somehow slightly diluted. When only God knows, the gift is as precious as it can be. We not only enjoy what we have done, but God can use this selflessness to build our character, and character-building better equips us to be the light of Christ.

When was the last time you did something significant for someone else, but did it anonymously?

The Human Condition

There is another side to this matter of doing good deeds anonymously. At least from my point of view, it has to do with the human condition. That is, when I do a good deed anonymously, I often secretly hope that someone will notice what I have done, and that spoils the whole thing.

Let me illustrate. There is a family in our neighborhood with a severely disabled child. One day as I drove by their house I noticed that the wind had scattered their trash that was awaiting pick-up. What seemed like hundreds of little white Styrofoam pieces were everywhere. It happened that I had a large plastic bag in the car and a prompting from the Lord to pick up the pieces. No one from inside the house would have noticed what I was doing and no neighbors passed by while I was doing it. But the truth is I hoped someone would notice and think what a fine Christian example I was. (And, of course, my good deed is no longer anonymous because I've told you about it!). For days I waited for someone to say something, and every time I passed that neighbor's house I sort of gave myself a "high five" for what I had done.

Now, here's the thing. My reactions were probably not sin, but they were definitely the sign of a character fault. But the character fault, in turn, helped remind me of the human condition...at least, my human condition. Reflecting on my shortcomings helps me to see how far I am from God's will even when I'm trying to do the right thing. It helps me to be realistic about myself in relation to God—that is, to keep me from being self-righteous—on the one hand, and grateful to him for his patience and forgiveness on the other. It comforts me to know that Jesus is aware of what we are like because he once lived among us here on earth (Hebrews 2:14-15, 4:15).

What comfort do you take in knowing that Jesus understands you just the way you are?

A New Twist to the Blame Game

We continue to look at ways in which God works in the lives of his people to make them more effective in being the light of Christ to the world. When something doesn't meet our expectations there is a tendency to blame the situation on someone else. That is especially true in relationships with our neighbors (defining that word in its broadest sense such as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan). Things aren't working out as they should and we are frustrated. We feel a need to blame someone rather than taking account of our own responsibility in whatever the matter is. The blame game started with Adam and Eve in the Garden and continues to be repeated in many facets of everyday life (Exodus 17:3b). My friend Thad Barnum calls it pointing the Eden finger.

This kind of thinking tends to exonerate us from responsibility for our own actions, problems or feelings. On a larger level it is manifested in frivolous lawsuits and civil and political unrest. Yet, in terms of personal wellbeing, we cannot find peace by blaming everyone else for what happens in our life. Although the actions of others do contribute to the situations that cause us anxiety and grief, we can only make peace within ourselves by rising above them and taking responsibility for our own feelings.

Some wonderful advice for dealing with blame comes from Dr. Henry Brandt. He once said to a friend of ours, "You are the only problem you will ever have. It's not the others around you or your circumstances. Now, there's great hope in that truth because you can take yourself to God and be changed. You can't take anyone else to God. But they can benefit from the change in you."

How often do you tend to blame someone else for difficulties you face?

Something about Patience

Patience, like discipline, is one of those traits we like to avoid talking about, especially talking about our own patience level. If we perceive we are not patient enough and want to do something about it, we may be like the guy who prayed, “Lord, I want patience, and I want it right now!” Patience implies waiting and enduring. It is in patience that we recognize God as the Lord of time who does not run behind schedule (Psalm 40:1-5).

The two primary qualities needed in order to be patient are inner peace and living one day at a time. Inner peace comes from a stable relationship with God through prayer, Bible study and worship. It helps us keep things in perspective, and focuses our attention on others and their needs rather than our selfish desires. Living one day at a time allows us to experience life at its fullest rather than fretting over things past or future.

A friend has suggested these steps for dealing with impatience: First, we need to *name* our own impatience. Then, after identifying it, we need to ask ourselves some questions: (a) Why am I being impatient? (b) Do I trust God in this circumstance? (c) Is there a good reason God is asking me to wait? (d) Am I just being selfish? Next, ask God, through his Holy Spirit, to reveal what is behind my impatience. Finally, confess it. Impatience, like every other sin, requires both the Lord’s forgiveness and the inward work of the Holy Spirit to overcome it. We need to make this a matter of prayer, and then experience the transformation that only God can work in us.

How do you deal with the tendency we all have to be impatient about some things?

How to Guard Your Heart

To grow in our relationship with the Lord that we may be the light of Christ, the place of personal receptivity is the heart. In the Bible the heart is the place of availability. Paul prays that Christ may dwell in our hearts (Ephesians 3:17). The heart is synonymous with our inner being (Ephesians 3:16) where the crucial issues of life are dealt with. The heart includes our innermost thoughts and our greatest aspirations. But we are also told in Scripture that “the heart is deceitful above all things” (Jeremiah 17:9). Just as it is capable of reaching to God it is also able to lead us astray. Thus, we need to guard our heart.

The way in which we guard our heart is to draw closer to God. Among other things, this means having a discipline of prayer and worship. To commune with the Lord, we need to provide both the quantity and quality of time necessary to do so. I well remember when I was a busy young executive telling a fellow Christian I just didn’t have time for prayer in my busy day. “You do have an alarm clock, don’t you?” was his wise response.

Set aside time every day to be with the Lord that he may help you guard your heart. Many people find it helpful to have quiet time with the Lord first thing in the morning. The day is ahead of us, and we can lift it up to the Lord. It is amazing how the difficult situations we think we will be facing during the day can be dealt with under the Lord’s guidance. As we set these matters before God, we suddenly realize they are not really that important or we are inspired to see a way of dealing with them that has never occurred to us. Sometimes we just get peace about the situation for which there are no easy answers.

To what extent do you have quiet time with the Lord every day?

Look Straight Ahead

Are you hampered by all the distractions we face every day? God wants us to concentrate on the desires that will keep us on the right path, the path that he has for us. Paul tells us to run in such a way as to get the prize (1 Corinthians 9:24). Don't run aimlessly, he goes on to say.

The Christian life takes hard work, self-denial and continual preparation. We need to make sure that our goals are in the right direction. We can build boundaries around our desires rather than running around in emotional or spiritual circles. Stay focused, look straight ahead, fix our sights on God's will and don't get sidetracked or distracted.

Just like being in the eye of a storm, we can find peace in the midst of the chaos around us. Having this kind of focus requires intention and practice. When we are facing situations in life that we know will be trying and could get us off track, there are some practical ways to deal with them. We can look at the situation as an opportunity rather than a problem. We can commit to being the one person who will stay focused on what God wants us to do regardless of what is going on with the others around us. We can decide that we will be a good listener rather than the one who has to do all the talking. Sticking to such an approach can have amazing results. If you find that this method works for you in one situation, try it in another. By being focused, we can shine more effectively for Christ.

How do you deal with distractions?

Work Hard or Hardly Work?

Have you ever thought you might learn something from an ant? Well, there is this wonderful word from Proverbs 6:6-8: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.” Many years ago, as an ambitious young man, I had the idea that all the routine work necessary to do a job well would one day lead to freedom from boring details. I envisioned top executives as being people who had risen above that work level and now had others to do their boring and routine chores. Once I became an executive myself, however, I saw how wrong I had been. The work at the top is not only more pressurized than jobs at the lower level, but all of the annoying details are still there! They may be of a different nature, but bone-wearying hard work simply can’t be avoided.

The proverb cautions against laziness. Interestingly, it uses the ant—whose work must be about as boring and routine as anything we could think of—for the illustration of not being lazy but doing hard work. People need rest and sleep, and God gave us the Sabbath as a weekly day for rest and restoration. But we shouldn’t rest when we are supposed to be working. Paul has some choice things to say about unwillingness to work in his second letter to the Thessalonians (see 3:6-13), the most direct being: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

But what about the routine things we face in life? Do we fret about whose day it is to take the garbage out, or do we go ahead and do it ourselves? It’s difficult to be a contented person if we are always keeping score on who is supposed to do what. Be glad that you are a light-bearer who is able to do something that relieves another person of having to do it. Remember the ant.

Reflect on your work ethic.

Bring Joy to Your Father

There are more ways than we might think of to follow the sixth commandment, to honor our father and our mother. Proverbs 10:1 says, “A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.” One of the ways we can bring joy to the heart of our father and not grieve our mother is to rely on them for guidance in the major issues of life, to include them in on our key decisions.

As young adults, this can mean letting them guide our education; later, consulting with them about the one we love and hope to marry; still later, apprising them of our vocational aims. In our day, people tend to change vocations, or at least jobs within vocations, several times during their life. These are prime times to consult with our parents if they are still alive. Our parents have lived longer and thus can be expected to have gained some wisdom that we do not yet have. The people closest to us know us best. They love us and care about our future. To leave them out of our key decisions does not bring joy to our father and can bring grief to our mother.

We can carry this further. We can go to our parents with all sorts of matters that affect our lives, not just those involving major decisions. The more we let them be involved, the more we are showing love to and respect for them. My parents died at a young age but my father’s father lived to be almost 105. I went to that godly man for advice as I would have to my father, and he remained wisely perceptive and tremendously supportive. As a result, he was a great joy to me, and I do believe I brought joy to him, the light of Christ shining in both directions!

How are you doing in showing love to your parents and letting them be a part of your life?

Scrupulosity

Scrupulosity is an interesting word; one we don't often hear. In theological terms it means being overly concerned with our moral or religious life. There is a tendency on the part of many people to believe that they have done things so sinful that God will not be willing to forgive them, which is not true. And there are others who have confessed their sins, but have never been able to accept God's forgiveness. They carry their sins around with them like dirty garbage. There are still others who see sin in everything they do that gives them pleasure, apparently thinking that God doesn't want Christians to have any fun. All of these are incorrect ways of looking at sin, repentance and forgiveness. God doesn't want to punish us; he loves us (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

The fact is that things we have done or left undone in the past that are evidence of sin may be more apparent to us as we grow in our relationship with God. As the light of Christ shines in our lives, we see ourselves as worse than we thought at the time. What we had passed off as minor offenses we now see as having wounded the heart of God. We are amazed at our former blindness as we see a whole swarm of shameful things coming up from within us. We are distressed at what we discover once we start looking.

We should, however, neither be amazed nor disheartened. We are not worse than we thought we were. On the contrary, we are better. First of all, bear in mind that we are better able to perceive our illness only as the healing begins. Secondly, now that we see our former actions or inactions in this new light, we simply need to confess them. God is not pleased with our being overwrought about things that simply need to be confessed and forgotten.

To what extent are you guilty of scrupulosity? What will you do about it?

Go Forth Boldly

Much like the problem of scrupulosity, there are those who find fault with themselves for even the most trivial things. It isn't the Spirit of God who brings these things to mind. God doesn't want us thinking this way. When he points out our faults, they are things that really need to be dealt with; and he usually does so gently, correcting us and comforting us at the same time. God awakens us to our need to deal with the major failings in our lives, and helps us resolve them in our own way but in accord with his will for us.

If we become focused on our every shortcoming, we can become paralyzed with fear of doing anything at all. That's not what God wants for us (Isaiah 57:14-15). There is risk in life. I'll say again that this life is a training ground for eternity with God. We are expected to move forward rather than moping along in our self-obsession. Of course we will make mistakes and fall short of whatever ideal we or others have set for ourselves. And, yes, we will sin. God knows our weaknesses and the frailty of mankind in general. He stands ready to forgive us, but he doesn't expect us to be in a constant state of self-condemnation.

God wants us to go forth boldly in this life. We have been given the Good News of Jesus Christ who died for us that we might be free. We are to proclaim that Good News in word and deed. Have you ever seen a person who looked like he has swallowed a light bulb? That's how we should look, with the light of Christ shining through us.

Do you tend to be self-condemning? What will you do about that?

Love Covers All Things

Peter said this: “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8). We can get ourselves in a lot of trouble by saying and doing things that stir up ill feelings. To show love instead is certainly the better solution.

It’s easy to get out of sorts with individuals and groups, those within our family, or co-workers, even those with whom we worship. Misunderstandings occur, they say things we resent, or their ideas seem totally contrary to what we believe. Arguments happen. Things we later wish we had not said, we say. Dissension is the result. What do we do about it?

We have all experienced or know stories of disagreements that have gotten out of hand and provoked long periods of bitterness. When this happens, we know how difficult it is for each party to the dispute to reach out to the other. Doing so seems like admitting we were wrong when we still feel very strongly that we were right. But, would we rather continue to carry the bitterness and all the ramifications of being out of relationship with the other? It’s not worth it. In my own experience, when I have initiated the attempt at reconciliation there have been wonderful results. The other person, who may have simply been an acquaintance at the time of the dispute, is suddenly a friend. We have weathered a storm together and a new bond exists between us.

Of course, the best policy is to show love to the other person before stirring up dissension in the first place. But sometimes, even when we have the best of intentions, it happens anyway. When it does, swallow your pride, remember that you are trying to be the light of Christ, and reach out to the other. Love covers all things.

To whom do you need to make amends? Will you?

Getting out of Focus

If we're going to grow in grace and the love and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, John Wesley believed there were three essentials. One is prayer, whether done in private or in worship. Another is the study of the Scriptures, and that implies more than just reading the Bible, but seeking to understand what you read and meditating on the implications of that for your life. The third is participating in the Lord's Supper. These Wesley believed to be chosen by God as the ordinary channels of his grace.

Thus it was so in the beginning and has been all down the ages of the Christian faith. Yet, unfortunately, we can lose our focus.

The focus is supposed to be on growing in grace and in knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, for some, the *means* becomes the *end*. We get overly involved in performing these spiritual routines rather than being influenced to do so out of our hunger for God. When this happens, these holy practices become sterile and a distraction from the kind of relationship God wants to have with us. God is not pleased with them. This is the problem Jesus had with the Pharisees (Matthew 23:13-36). It is as though we are trying to earn our salvation by our acts rather than living into the grace that God's love desires for us. When we feel ourselves getting out of focus in this way, it is time to take stock of ourselves. God wants our hearts, not our performance.

How are you doing on Wesley's three essentials?

Dealing with Insults

It is hard not to retaliate when someone insults or annoys us. However, doing so only makes matters worse. We solve nothing and we invite further trouble. A better idea is to respond slowly, prayerfully and quietly. Proverbs 15:1 tells us “a gentle answer turns away wrath.” It’s difficult to argue with those who turn us a soft reply to a charge we might have made against them. A rising voice and harsh words, on the other hand, invite an angry response. If we turn away from wrath and use gentle words, we can expect a much better outcome.

Here’s an idea. Respond quietly the next time someone says to you something like, “You’re crazy if you think we can accomplish what needs to be done by doing it your way.” Take a deep breath and then say, “Tell me why you think that’s true.” Then practice being a good listener. We may remain convinced that our plan is the better one, but at least we have given the other person a chance to state his opinion. And, surprise!, it might be a good one.

Such an attitude might appear to some to be weak, but taking time to hear a contrary point of view is really a showing of strength of conviction. It is often the person who is unsure of himself who shows his annoyance at once. It takes energy to always be right. It takes no energy to allow the other person to express himself; and, as light-bearers, we are to love one another. That would seem to encompass ignoring an insult rather than showing immediate annoyance.

How well do you deal with insults and slights? Will you do better now?

Words Inaptly Spoken

How many times have we said something, perhaps in the heat of argument, and wished immediately that we could take it back? Of course, there are also times when we have stated something clearly and positively, even though we knew it may have been hurtful to the person to whom we were speaking, and felt good about having taken such a strong and forthright stand. But even in those situations, we may later wish we had been more tactful and understanding. Proverbs 12:18 says, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

As those who would be the light of Christ, we don’t want to hurt people, and reckless words can be particularly hurtful. We have undoubtedly been the victim of them ourselves. In “the back roads of our memory” probably lurk painful words others have said to us perhaps many years in the past. We don’t want to implant such hurtful words in the minds of our loved ones, or anyone else for that matter. Finding ways to avoid reckless words is a wise practice for all of us.

One thing we can do when we are on the verge of reckless words is to pause and perhaps count to ten. Anything that will allow us to think before we speak is helpful in avoiding reckless words. Better still is taking the time for a brief prayer. Pausing (and praying) helps us get things in perspective. When we weigh what we were getting ready to say against the damage it is likely to cause, the Lord can lead us to silence or a gentle word that can bring healing.

What works for you in preventing your hurting others with your words?

The Anxious Heart

As Christians, we know we are not to have an anxious heart, but nonetheless we worry. A little worry is not necessarily a bad thing; it helps us stay on top of the situations and issues in life we need to deal with. The problem is the anxious heart that weighs us down (Proverbs 12:25). We will be much less effective in life if we are paralyzed by anxiety. And, letting our worries dominate us is evidence that we are not trusting God.

Let's look at biblical ways to deal with our anxieties and a practical way as well. The biblical approach involves immediately raising the question, when an anxiety attack hits us: What is God's will in this situation? Does he want me weighed down with worry, or is there something I am to learn in this situation? If the attack comes in the middle of the night, God may want us praying about the matter rather than agonizing over it.

A practical approach (though certainly not an unbiblical one) is to be aware of how quickly our negative and insecure feelings can spiral out of control unless we nip them in the bud. Again, if the attack comes in the middle of the night—a time when we seem most vulnerable—it may begin by our being reminded of something we need to do the following day. Instead of being grateful that we have remembered the matter, it may tend to lead us to other things we will face in the day ahead, and we worry about them. The solution is to notice what is going on in our mind before these worries have a chance to build momentum. Keep a notepad next to your bed on which you can write down the thing that occurs to you in the middle of the night, be cheered by the fact that the Lord has called the matter to your attention, and then go back to sleep before other thoughts have a chance to creep in. We'll be better equipped to shine the light of Christ in the day ahead.

How do you deal with your anxieties? Are your methods working?

Guarding Our Life

In Proverbs there are a lot of wise guidelines for living. Proverbs 13:3 says, “He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin.”

Let’s look at three ways of guarding our life in relation to things we say. The first is from the point of view of self-control. A fulfilled life is one that is in control. That is, controlled by the Holy Spirit within us. If we are out of control, we are open to the wiles of Satan, confounded by confusion, and lacking in wisdom. We are outside the will of God. Not only are we unlikely to guard our lips concerning what we say about others, but about what we say in general. Our speech may be laced with obscenities, it may brag about our assumed accomplishments, or it may display our ignorance. We have not mastered our self-control if we cannot master what we say.

The second way in which we can guard our life by guarding our lips is to learn to listen. Too often our conversations become contests to out-talk one another. Instead of listening to what the other person has to say, we are busy thinking of what we want to say. This leads to missing the other person’s point of view, overreacting, misinterpreting meanings, imputing false motives, and forming incorrect opinions before the other person has had a chance to finish speaking. We guard our life by learning from others.

Thirdly, we find joy in making an appropriate reply. If we are in control of our talk and are good listeners, we are much more likely to respond in an appropriate manner. A timely word is a word of wisdom, grace and healing. It guards our life and lets our light shine on others.

How good a listener are you? How might you improve this skill?

A Heart at Peace

We should all want to have a heart that is at peace. Proverbs 14:30 says, “A heart at peace gives life to the body, but envy rots the soul.” We will be more physically healthy if our heart is at peace. Unnecessary worry, envy and other troubling traits wear our bodies down and make us more susceptible to physical injury and disease. A heart at peace gives health to our spiritual and emotional lives as well.

Envy will most certainly rot our spirits and our emotions as well as our bodies. Envy is evidence of our lack of trust in God. We think we are entitled to something that other people have, and we want it for ourselves. We are, in a sense, expressing our dissatisfaction with God because he has allowed other people to have or achieve things that are denied to us. Envy eats at our inner being. It is only when we can realize that everything belongs to God, and that we should be grateful for what we have, that we can begin to defeat the insidious disease of envy. We will know we have won this battle when we rejoice in what other people have rather than wishing it was ours.

Perfectionism is another thing that can keep our heart from being at peace. Peace of mind and heart are in conflict with perfectionism. When we are under a compulsion to always have things a certain way—better than they already are—we are engaged, almost by definition, in a losing battle. As with envy, rather than being grateful for what we have, we are focused on what’s wrong and why we need to fix it. We are in a constant state of dissatisfaction, discontent. Whether our discontent is related to what we are dealing with in our own lives or the “imperfections” in the lives of others, the very act of focusing on the imperfection severely hinders peace of mind and heart. God’s wisdom is to do our very best but not to be concentrating on what’s wrong with us and everything and everybody around us. When we quit stressing on imperfections, we will be more open to God’s perfect will, and that leads to a heart at peace.

What issues do you need to deal with in order to have a heart at peace?

The Honesty Policy

Our word should be our bond. This is an expression that was widely used in former times to indicate that a written agreement was not necessary. What the persons said could stand as a contract between them because honesty was expected. (Proverbs 16:11 says, “Honest scales are from the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of his making”). In the Old Testament verbal agreements were binding on the parties because they placed their reputations behind them. When the first deacons were chosen in the early Christian Church, it was because they were respected men.

Whatever we do vocationally and otherwise in our lives, we know what is honest and what is not. Pressure is sometimes brought to bear on us to be dishonest, perhaps in some very small matter, in order to advance ourselves or gain a profit. However, any such action is clearly against the will of God. He demands honesty in every transaction. There is, of course, the temptation to rationalize. “Everybody does it” is often at the source of such temptations. As Christians, we simply don’t have that option.

An attempt was recently made to get a relative of ours to conceal her comfortable financial situation so she could take advantage of the federal government’s Medicaid program. She rejected the suggestion immediately because it was contrary to her Christian faith, but she was shocked to find that others who professed to be Christians were taking advantage of the government in this way. God has set the standard, and we are to do his will. Light-bearers should pray for discernment and wisdom to be consistently honest and fair in all our dealings.

Where do you see slippage from honesty in our world today, and what can you do about it?

A Wise Person's Heart

Think of the wisest person you have known and reflect on his or her qualities. Consider, further, the extent to which you have tried to duplicate those qualities in your own life. Now reflect on how you might instruct others in the way of wisdom.

What are the qualities of a wise person's heart? Perhaps the foremost quality would be trust in God. From that would spring inner peace, strength and quiet assurance. These qualities should be evident in the person's demeanor and actions. A wise person chooses his battles wisely. Life is filled with opportunities to make a big deal out of a matter or letting it go. Wisdom comes in knowing what is really important and what is not (Proverbs 16:23). If we choose to tackle those matters that really do matter while ignoring those that don't, we'll be much more successful in handling the important things, much more content with life in general and be better reflections of the light of Christ.

We can look at life as one huge battlefield in which we face one impending disaster after another. This battlefield image can be overwhelming and depressing. Yes, it's true that a lot of unexpected and often unpleasant occurrences will be facing us every day. But, so what? Many of these things will be trivial in nature, and we should treat them as such. If we "sweat the small stuff" it blinds us from dealing effectively with the things that really need our attention.

It's better to look at life as a series of challenges that, with God's help, we can take on one step at a time. The challenges are the big stuff, things we can learn from and grow. And, as you deal with them, remember to tell yourself this, "God and I are an overwhelming majority."

When faced with the issues of life, to what extent can you see them as challenges rather than simply as problems?

Practical Guidance

When I'm feeling lax in my spiritual disciplines, it is often helpful for me to hear what some of the great spiritual teachers of the past have said. Here is a thought from the French devotional writer Francis de Sales. All Christians should have a rule of prayer; that is, a discipline of prayer and spiritual growth that we follow as best we can day by day. For each person that rule or discipline will be special. Even those closest to us by marriage or spiritual connection will have practices different from ours. But here are some elements of a rule that might be helpful as a general guide.

Begin the day by committing yourself, body, mind and spirit, into the Lord's hands. Then, set aside a half-hour a day to be with God in prayer, Bible study and meditation. Speak with the Lord during the course of the day, asking, praising and thanking him; be immediate in prayer as needs and opportunities arise. Realize that God is present to you though his Holy Spirit within you to comfort, enlighten, encourage and guide you all the day long.

In addition to these spiritual activities, it is equally important to be God's person in our contacts with others because a life of prayer should be reflected in the life we live in the world around us. Undertake the most challenging situations you face with cheerfulness and the expectation that God can and will use you. Remember that the true measure of all we do is its conformity to God's will. Perform an unselfish act on behalf of another at least once a day. And, to keep yourself faithful, have someone or a small group to whom you are accountable for your life in Christ.

What is your rule of prayer or rule of life?

A Cheerful Heart

Proverbs 17:22 says, “A cheerful heart is good medicine.” Why would a cheerful heart be good medicine? A person with a cheerful heart is much more likely to be healthy than a person with a despondent heart. Cheerfulness is evidence of a positive attitude, and a positive attitude promotes good health. But it also promotes good health in others. The person with a smile of welcome, an encouraging word and enthusiasm for the task ahead breeds cheer in the hearts of others, and that’s good medicine for all.

A good sense of humor is evidence of a cheerful heart. A person with a good sense of humor is looking at life from a balanced point of view. He doesn’t take himself too seriously. He can laugh at himself, even use his own failures as fodder for jokes. Ideally, his humor is wholesome; it doesn’t focus on the misfortunes of others, nor does it contain foul language and smutty illustrations. He sees those things as negative, unnecessary, and certainly not uplifting. He is self-effacing rather than cynical or sarcastic. He is someone we like to be around.

Not all of us have a good sense of humor by nature, however. So, how can we begin the day with a cheerful heart? Richard Carlson recommended taking time every day to think of someone to thank. He said it is one of the most important habits he developed. By beginning the day thinking of someone for whom we are grateful, it builds gratitude in our hearts and we will shine more brightly for Christ.

How do you evidence a cheerful heart?

Keeping Wisdom in View

There is nothing wrong with dreaming big dreams. The problem is keeping things in perspective while we do. We all know people whose dreams of the future have always been too big for them. Rather than undertaking a vocation they could handle, they have consistently shot for the “big bucks”—jobs they thought would provide the wealth they were entitled to—and they have continued to fail at all they sought to do. Proverbs 12:11 tells us: “He who works his land will have abundant food, but he who chases fantasies lacks judgment.”

Wisdom tells us to align our goals with God’s will for our life, being the person he wants us to be. Keeping wisdom in view means being honest in our relationships, patient with ourselves and those around us, and loving toward all. From a worldly point of view, this may not seem to be an exciting way to live our lives, but it has eternal consequences. Now may be a good time to take inventory of our dreams and goals to see if they align with God’s will or are selfish and unrealistic.

In the course of taking a look at our life, it is important to remember that we all have mood swings. A day that gets off to a glorious start can become drudgery if our mood turns negative. In such instances we need to remind ourselves that, for some reason or other, a bad mood has overtaken us. We should simply pass it off for what it is...an unavoidable human condition that will go away in time if we just leave it alone. In such situations, I tell myself, “This too will pass.” This keeps wisdom in view.

How do you keep wisdom in view?

The People around Us

Let's look at trying to understand the people around us, trying to develop an attitude of being more accepting and less judgmental (Matthew 7:1-5). Then we will be more even-tempered, will be more restrained in our words and even silent when it is better to say nothing at all.

At an impressionable age, I had occasion to read virtually all of the novels of the English writer Thomas Hardy. There were no real heroes in his novels. The character of the various people in his books was always well formed, but they all had serious weaknesses as a result of the culture in which they were raised, their circumstances in life, and other factors. Without realizing it at the time, I became more tolerant of the people around me because I had come to understand the basic differences in human beings as reflected in those books.

If we've ever traveled to a foreign country, we realize what a diverse world we live in. But, in a sense, we can see the same thing sitting on a bench at the mall or in a theme park. People come in all shapes and sizes, from varying cultural backgrounds and assorted circumstances of life. If we find ourselves being tempted to judge others because of the way they dress or the things they say, a healthy reaction is: "That person's world is certainly different from mine, but it's her world." The point is that not only are people in different parts of the world different from us, but every individual everywhere is different from us.

If we can come to understand our world in this way, we will be much better adjusted to life. It's not a matter of simply tolerating differences but understanding and honoring the fact that it couldn't be any other way. It is how we can make friends across cultural and other barriers, and be reconcilers for Christ and bearers of light.

How do you try to understand differences between people in a helpful way?

Checking Our Zeal Quotient

When Jesus cleared the Temple of the moneychangers (John 2:16-17), he did so with such zeal that his disciples remembered Psalm 69:9: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” So, zeal itself is not a bad thing. In the often apathetic and lethargic world in which we live today, a little more zeal would be welcome. The problem is that it is not good to have unbridled zeal. Otherwise, we are likely to run around doing all the wrong things.

Sometimes we have a tendency to rush through life, hurling ourselves into the unknown because we haven’t taken the time and exercised the wisdom to figure out what is going on and how to deal with it. One of the biggest reasons for divorce in our day is the failure of couples to understand the nature of married life. Others experiment with drugs, the occult, and sex without considering the consequences. Still others plunge into their job without evaluating whether it is the proper line of work for themselves and stay busy, though miserable, without knowing what the problem is.

But even the ordinary, faithful Christian can exercise inordinate zeal in our everyday lives. We stay so focused on what we believe we are supposed to be doing that there is no time for our loved ones or for enjoying life. We convince ourselves that our obsession with our “to do” list is only temporary. We’ll soon complete what we have to do and be free to be calm, relaxed and happy. Unfortunately, that rarely happens. As soon as we check several items off our list, more have appeared.

So, it’s time for self-evaluation. Remember that no matter how important we think we are and how essential the things are on our list, nothing is as important as our relationship with God and with those with whom he allows us to share our lives as bearers of the light of Christ.

Check your zeal quotient.

Expecting too Much?

Do we put our spiritual leaders on the spot by expecting too much of them? When a devoted Christian business executive reached retirement, he undertook to be of service to a major Christian ministry as a volunteer. After a brief and tumultuous time as adviser to a national ministry headed by a well-known clergyman, he resigned in disgust. When my friend who had recommended him to the ministry asked if he had resigned because of trouble with the leader of the organization, the man replied, “Trouble? If I had stayed any longer, I would have killed the guy!” My friend told him, “The problem is not with him, it’s with you. You forgot that this guy is only human. You put him on a pedestal and wouldn’t let him be himself.”

How often do we do the same thing to our spiritual leaders? We hold them to a much higher standard than we hold ourselves. If we are honest about our own failings in trying to live the Christian life, it should make us more tolerant of others. We may need to forgive them, as Jesus told Peter to do, seventy times seven. Jesus calls us to be unlimited in our forgiving.

If we can live the message of the bumper sticker that says, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven,” we will be following Jesus’ teaching (Matthew 26:28). If we are reflective about our lives, each day should give us ample evidence of our own imperfections. And, we should also take into account that we have “blind spots” that prevent us from seeing some of our greatest faults. The results should produce the humility we need in order not to hold others, including our spiritual leaders, to too great a standard of perfection. The less our expectations of ourselves and others, the more we will enjoy this life in Christ.

What do you need to do to show appreciation for one of your spiritual leaders?

Living in the Present

When my wife and I took a personality test years ago, we found that I have a tendency to focus on the future and she on the past. It often makes for interesting discussions! In *The Screentape Letters*, C. S. Lewis makes the point that God wants us to live in the present because it is the time that it most real. And, God wants us to deal with reality.

By living in the past, we are living in memories rather than reality; dwelling on the past is living in an unreal world. But, by living in the future, we are in the most unreal world of all, the world of our imagination. Of course, there is nothing wrong with thinking about the future in order to better plan for the present (just as it is appropriate to learn from our past); but dwelling on the future is the problem. It leads us to worry about things that will probably not happen. It is also true that most sin is bred in the future if we allow ourselves to focus on how to get our own way, take advantage of others, or satisfy our lustful desires.

God offers salvation to all, and the time to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior is now, not at some future date that may not come. There is no time like the present to accept God's love. God wants us to live in the present with a view toward eternity. He wants us present to him and, as light-bearers, to those he loves now, not off somewhere in our memories or our imaginations. It is in the present that God can get our attention and let us know his will. By living in God's will, we can thoroughly enjoy the present as well as eternal life with him (Matthew 6:33).

How able are you to live in the present?

Freedom from Self

I have a friend who always makes the point that sin is not breaking God's rules (i.e. the Ten Commandments); that's only a symptom of sin. Sin is our self-centeredness. Perhaps the greatest battle we face in life is the battle to overcome our self-centeredness. So long as we are centered in ourselves, we are prisoners in a world of our own making. Our insistence on standing up for our rights brings us into unending conflict with those who are standing up for theirs. Our grasping after the things we think we need puts us on a collision course with others. Our anger raises its ugly head when things don't go our way. Our pride brings out the worst in us when we fail to get the recognition we think we deserve.

The only remedy is to put God on the throne of our lives and dethrone ourselves. If we can put our infatuation with ourselves behind us and focus on God, we have nothing of real importance in the eyes of God to lose, to fear, or to consider. It is then that we will find the peace that passes understanding. Nothing can harm us. We can no longer be attacked through our hopes and fears, our expectations and entitlements, our pride and prejudices.

The more we become free from ourselves, the stronger we will grow in the Lord, the deeper our peace will become, and the more brightly we can shine Christ's love on the world around us. If we can overcome any lingering wishes or clinging memories that are tied to our selfish nature, if we can break these bonds, our freedom can become boundless. We can even reach the point at which we don't fear those who can only kill the body but not the soul (Matthew 10:39).

Reflect on how free from yourself you have been able to become as you have grown in Christ.

Being Gentle with Yourself

Those who are in a right—and not self-centered—relationship with themselves, understand the importance of being patient with themselves (Romans 5:1-5). They are able to be as charitable with themselves as they would with others. They can accept flattery because they know that whatever they have accomplished was by the grace of God and not by their own talent, wisdom or personality. Likewise, when faced with the trials of life, they can accept them as being from the hand of God to help them form character through perseverance.

Such people know what needs correction in their own lives, and try hard to correct it. But, in doing so, they deal with themselves as gently as they would deal with others in like situations. They work at it patiently, not expecting more than is practical under the circumstances. They are not discouraged when immediate change does not result. They are not blind to their own faults, but are willing to put up with whatever may be necessary to correct them. They don't give in to pettiness and pride or easy but incomplete solutions.

In facing the trials of life, God wants us do so with patience as he works in our lives bringing us his grace and love. We do best to let troubles pass away, like a headache or fever, without doing anything to promote or prolong them. Our faithfulness to God is more sincere when shown through the trials of life than when everything seems to be going our way.

How patient are you with yourself?

Maintaining Balance

There is a delicate balance between being diligent in our spiritual disciplines and enjoying the freedom we have in Christ. The first helps us grow in faithfulness, the latter in wholeness. If we focus on our disciplines to the exclusion of our freedom, we can fall into the bondage of scrupulosity. If, on the other hand, we live into our freedom to the exclusion of our spiritual disciplines, we can become apathetic and drift away from our relationship with God. Rigidity in the fulfillment of our spiritual regimen—what has been called being “sanctified with vinegar”—constricts our hearts and minds; but, too much liberty can loosen them to our danger.

Balance is the answer. The Apostle Paul reminds us that we have been given liberty (Galatians 5:1) but are not to use our freedom as an excuse to sin (Romans 6:1). Real liberty consists in obeying God in all things, and in following the light that shows us our responsibilities and the grace that guides us in fulfilling them. It means having the intention of pleasing God in all things; not just doing what is acceptable to him, but what is *most* acceptable.

The laws of God are not meant to be burdensome, harsh, and restricting, ruining our lives by weighing us down with unrealistic expectations. God gives us a higher law that rises above all this, the true liberty of those who bear the light of Christ. This is a law that calls us to do that which is most pleasing to our Heavenly Father. It is what Augustine of Hippo meant when he said, “Love God, and then do what you will.”

Reflect on the issue of balance in your life based on this teaching.

Swatting Gnats

There are worrisome thoughts that, like gnats, flit around within our minds even as we are trying to be in communion with God in prayer and worship. Francis de Sales says that some of those gnats are foolish, self-centered thoughts. They remind us of all the good deeds we do, and how much better we can do some things than anyone else. These are temptations of the enemy, leading us to pride. We shouldn't dwell on such teasing thoughts, but just swat them away. This would happen to me on the way home from a really good day at work, seducing me into thinking how capable I was until I realized who was sending that gnat into my mind (1 Peter 5:8-9) and swatted it away.

Then there are the gnats of emotionalism concerning our failures. Because we are repentant of our sins, we get wrought up over the wrong things we have done, wring our hands, and demonstrate our great sorrow for them. When such feelings are a natural consequence of our penitence, they are not bad in themselves. But what God really wants from us is steadfast amendment of life, not shallow emotionalism. Chase these gnats away.

Finally there are the gnats of impure thoughts that flit into our heads when our focus should be on God. The worst thing to do is to indulge these thoughts. The more we do so, the more we become enmeshed in them. It is never advisable to argue with temptations. We can just say, "Lord, you know that I honor you above all things, and that I am yours." That's how we brush those gnats away.

What gnats do you need to swat away?

Answered Prayer

What we believe about prayer is, of course, shaped by our own thoughts, according to Oswald Chambers. The best way to think of prayer is like the breath in our lungs and the blood in our veins. The blood flows ceaselessly, and the breath continues constantly; we are not conscious of these functions, but they are always going on. Prayer is not an exercise; it is life. We should beware of anything that interferes with our spontaneous prayer. “Pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17) is the childlike habit of spontaneous prayer in our hearts to God all the time.

Jesus never mentioned unanswered prayer because he had the boundless certainty that prayer is always answered. Do we have, by the Holy Spirit within us, the absolute certainty that Jesus had about prayer, or do we think of times when God does not seem to have answered our prayer? Jesus tells us that the one who asks receives (Matthew 7:7-8). Yet, perhaps we doubt. This is probably due to the fact that God seems not to have answered our prayer the way we wanted him to do. Nonetheless, God answers prayer in the best way—not sometimes, but every time—although the immediate answer may not be the one we wanted.

The danger with us is that we want to rationalize concerning the things Jesus says so that they fit our own common sense approach to things. If it were only common sense, it would not be worthwhile for him to say it. The things Jesus says about prayer are supernatural revelations.

Reflect on how satisfying your prayer life is and how you might improve it.

Generosity

We can choose to sow seeds of generosity or of stinginess. Two passages of Scripture from *The Living Bible* put generosity into perspective. The first is Galatians 6:7-8: “Don’t be misled; remember that you can’t ignore God and get away with it: a man will always reap just the kind of crop he sows! If he sows to please his own wrong desires, he will be planting seeds of evil and he will surely reap a harvest of spiritual decay and death; but if he plants the good things of the Spirit, he will reap the everlasting life that the Holy Spirit gives him.” The other is Hosea 10:12: “Plant good seeds of righteousness, and you will reap a crop of my love; plow the hard ground of your hearts, for now is the time to seek the Lord, that he may come and shower salvation on you.” The choice is ours.

After defeating the kings who had captured Lot, Abram gave a tithe of everything he had taken in the battle to Melchizedek, king of Salem, and basically the rest he left to the king of Sodom (Genesis 14:17-24). Giving a tenth to show appreciation for what God has done was customary. Even in pagan religions of Abram’s day, the people offered a tithe to the gods. Abram, however, gave it all away. For him, the victory itself was a sufficient gift from God. Those who would be the light of Christ today realize that all they have is a gift from God and reflect Abram’s generous attitude. We can give generously when we realize that what we possess is not really ours in the first place. Instead of thinking of being generous by giving God 10% of our income, it is more appropriate to realize that all we have is God’s and he lets us keep 90%.

When I was first approached about financial stewardship, the one who called on me discouraged me for making a generous pledge on the basis of my being a young man with family responsibilities “and the church doesn’t need the money.” When, some years later, I learned about tithing, began to do so and grew much closer to God and dependence on him, I felt I had been cheated out of that relationship during the intervening years.

How generous do you consider yourself to be? How could you prove it?

“You Will Be My Witnesses”

Do you take time to reflect on where and to whom you are witnessing your faith in Jesus Christ? Jesus told his disciples that they would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Even though he was speaking to specific people prior to his ascension to be with the Father, it is a message for all Christians for all time.

By “witnessing” Jesus meant that his followers will be sharing the word of the kingdom of God that has been brought into existence by his life, death and resurrection. And, we are to be doing it in ever-increasing circles: first, in Jerusalem (our immediate “neighborhood”); then, all Judea (out into our larger community); then, Samaria (throughout our nation); and finally, all over the world.

All disciples of Christ are called to be witnesses. The question is: what kind of witness am I to be? Our role should consist of witnessing to the reality of Christ in our lives by our words and our deeds. We can do that in our “neighborhood” to those with whom we are in regular contact: our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers. Some, however, will feel called to move out into a larger circle: we might be involved in reaching out to people in need in our greater community. Some will even get involved in state-wide or national movements of evangelism or human service. A few may feel called to be missionaries of one kind or another to the world. For Christ’s message to be heard, Christians need to be spreading the light of Christ in ever-increasing circles, just as he called us to do.

To whom might you witness today?

Differing Approaches to Reaching Out

Do you ever stop to think about how much God loves each and every person on earth? In Matthew 18:10-14, Jesus had called a little child and had him standing with him (18:2). He focuses on the child, the importance of children and of not discounting them. Then he gives the illustration of the lost sheep and how its owner will go to all lengths to find the one that has strayed.

We are dealing here with the importance to God of every human being on earth. Jesus wants everyone brought to God no matter how difficult it may be to reach them. He doesn't want us to be looking down on children or others we might consider "beneath us." Not only that, Jesus wants us to use every means at our disposal to reach out to the lost (that is, those who have not accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior).

Thus, we are challenged to consider the approaches that will work best in each category of people we encounter in life. There are those who are hardened of heart, believe in something foreign to Christianity or are simply apathetic. They need prayer and the gentle witness of Christ working in us. There are those who, on the other hand, are open to everything but committed to nothing, shallow in their thoughts, and tend to consider everything as relative. They need to be shown wholeness of life in Christ through our witness of word and deed. Then there are folks who are materialistic, possessed by their possessions, and more concerned with the physical than the spiritual side of life. They need to experience an event or a strong witness that can open the spiritual side of their lives on a permanent basis. We can seek the Lord's guidance in reaching out to each of these "lost sheep" situations. Fortunately, there are also people who are ready for us to pray with them to give their lives to the Lord. We should be prepared to do that as well.

What approach or approaches might work for you?

The Basis of Our Hope

In *Finding Hope in a Chaotic World*, William C. Frey wrote, “Hope depends less on wishful thinking and more on the nature and promises of God, and on God’s faithfulness. God has done it in the past, God promises to do it again, and God keeps his promises.” Hope is a powerful, positive force in our lives born out of the experience of trusting God. It is an anchor for the soul, firm and secure (Hebrews 6:19a).

Frey points out that hope has the power to offset the adversity that we face from time to time in life. He notes that there are people we know who face circumstances that we cannot fathom handling ourselves, and yet they do so with joy, vitality and hope. He also says, “As we look at our blessings we need to remember that God desires our ultimate joy, not simply our immediate pleasure. Some things are literally blessings in disguise.”

According to Frey, “Phillips Brooks, who wrote *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, was once asked what he considered the greatest proof of the truth of Christianity. He replied, ‘An aunt of mine who lives in New Hampshire.’”

True hope gives us comfort in the midst of our greatest trials. Rather than becoming entangled in the difficulties of the moment, we can look with hope toward the resolution of them or the realization that, in the long run, they are not so daunting as they seem. Hope, if we will let it, brings sunshine to an overcast day. Let’s let the light of Christ shine forth with hope in us this day and in all the days ahead.

What is the basis of your hope?

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