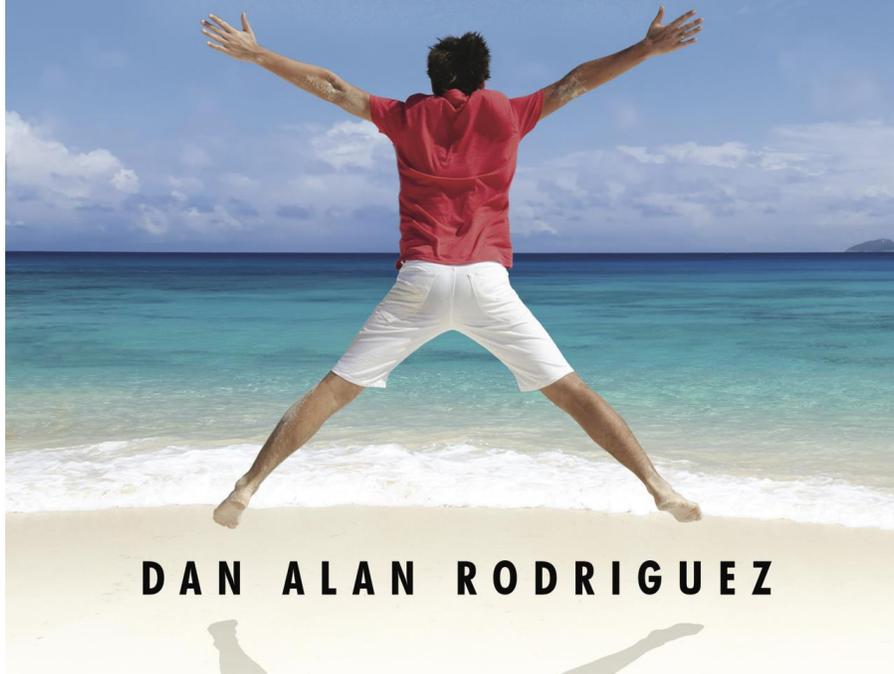


A CALL TO RETURN

Restoring the Roots of Our Relationship with Jesus

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DAN ALAN RODRIGUEZ

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Dan Alan Rodriguez

A Call to Return—Restoring the Roots of Our Relationship with Jesus

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Scholarly sources cited in abbreviated form in the footnotes are acknowledged in full in the Bibliography.

Dedication

A legacy of faith began with my grandmother Josephina, continued and greatly expanded through my father, Israel, and my mother, Noemi. My father, a resident of heaven since 1983, was my first mentor in the Lord. He was deeply knowledgeable of the Scripture, and I learned much from him. He planted seeds of God's Word in my heart that served as a foundation for some of the things in this book. I thank God for a father who lived what he preached and was an example of what it means to trust the Lord Jesus!

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Introduction

When I was eleven years old I started training in self-defense. I was inspired by late 1960s martial arts movies and the fact that I got beat up at summer camp by someone considered by many to be a “sissy.” It was hard to live down the event, especially for my dad, an ex-military police officer who was also an Army boxer.

When Dad heard that his son was beaten up by a “sissy,” he said, “The boy needs help!”

Dad’s solution was to enroll me in an uncompromising karate school with a Japanese instructor who had recently immigrated to Puerto Rico. There I was—eleven and training on an unpadded cement floor with an instructor who barely knew English and knew no Spanish. The training was relentless, and despite Puerto Rico’s high humidity and searing heat, the school had no air conditioning. Mopping up my sweat from the floor became an essential part of my training!

But it worked. I toughened up, and my appreciation for the martial arts never waned. For many years, martial arts movies were my favorite genre. Some were like parables, praising certain virtues and teaching why others were evil or wrong.

Stories or parables can be the best way to illustrate teachings. Jesus loved parables and used them often to convey moral lessons and kingdom principles. I will follow His example by offering you a story right now, about a warrior who sought higher wisdom:

After going through many battles, and winning every encounter because of his superb training and fighting spirit, a certain warrior came to an old, blind sage seeking the answer to his unending quest for enlightenment. The great warrior’s prize for his many victories was to receive from the blind man an ancient book of wisdom that would reveal the secrets he so earnestly yearned to understand. Many warriors before him had died in their attempt to retrieve the great book, but as the victor to every encounter, he alone was ready to receive the amazing prize.

The sage warned that the book of wisdom would reveal many things the warrior would not like hearing. He also warned that the fighter’s lifelong rage and bitter hatred had turned him into something the book would expose. The warrior could not hide from

the truth; he would find it on every page. And he would have to live with the consequences of what he found.

Undeterred by the sage's warnings, the warrior grabbed the book from his hands. "Finally," thought the warrior, "I am about to get the answers I fought so hard to obtain!"

What would the great book of wisdom reveal to him? What would it say?

The warrior opened to the first page and was shocked to find a mirror that reflected the monster he had become. Horrified, he turned to the second page, and it was a mirror, too!

Anxiously and quickly, the warrior turned the pages only to find that every page of the thick book was a mirror reflecting his war-battered, bruised, and deeply scarred face!

The sage sternly but calmly turned to the warrior and said, "This is what you are and what you have become. Unless you change, you will have to live with the consequences. It is your choice from now on."

The ultimate book of wisdom is the Bible. Like the mirror in the parable you just read, the Bible reveals truth. All of it is pure, but you won't always like hearing it. If you embrace it, however, you will be blessed.

For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (James 1:23-25 NKJV).

The book you now hold is a mirror, too. It will serve as a reflection of how you are living, what you are listening to and have been exposed to, and what fruit is produced through your life. The tone of the book is love out of a pure heart, but it is a tough love (see 1 Tim. 1:5). This love produces the divine encounter and confrontation that end in a glorious conclusion. It is your opportunity to take a good, hard, look at yourself so that you might be established and qualified by the Master to do His bidding.

As you read, consider God's counsel:

Watch the path of your feet and all your ways will be established

(Proverbs 4:26 NASB).

Examine [test, prove] yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?— unless indeed you are disqualified (2 Corinthians 13:5 NKJV).

An anointed message can be hard-hitting and cut through ideas like a two-edged sword (see Heb. 4:12). This book will do that for many. Some who read the manuscript commented that what the Lord gave me was more like a hammer. Others said it was like a battle-ax!¹ We can agree that this message does not tiptoe through the tulips. No doubt some will be shocked at the conclusions that are reached.

Why is this kind of book necessary at this time in the history of the Church?

My spirit has often been grieved as the Lord has shown me (in the Spirit) the condition of many in the Body of Christ (the Church). If Jesus returned today, His Church would not be ready to meet Him face to face! That is why the Holy Spirit mandated this book. But it is not an easy read meant to tickle the senses. It is for those who desire more out of their relationship with God than the status quo, and are willing to do what it takes to get there.

A war is raging in the heavenlies for every member of the Church, the Body of Christ in the earth. The spiritual welfare of many hangs in the balance. Deception has spread in the land. Many are losing their way. The great shaking has begun!

I pray that the revelation of the Lord Jesus found in these words sparks zeal in your heart that burns until His return and throughout eternity. May you be strengthened in Him powerfully for His glory and kingdom. May you be in the company of those to whom the Lord will say on that day, "Well done good and faithful servant!" (See Matthew 25:21.)

Be mightily blessed!

¹ See Jeremiah 23:29; 51:20; Matthew 3:10.

A Prophetic Call to Return

*“Return to Me,” declares the LORD of hosts, “that I may return to you”...
(Zechariah 1:3 NASB).*

*For the LORD your God is gracious and compassionate and will not turn
His face away from you if you return to Him (2 Chronicles 30:9b NASB).*

A prophetic call is going out to the Body of Christ in our day. The Holy Spirit is calling for a return to holy living in the fear of the Lord, through obedience to His Word. It is time to return to the Lord wholeheartedly—to pull out all the stops and be completely sold out to God, *with no reservations*.

The Lord Jesus is requiring all from you and me. He does not want us to be halfhearted or to live a lukewarm existence. He is looking for those who are fired up and ready to obey Him. It is a prophetic call to return to the things that matter *to God*. He is waiting with open arms of grace and compassion. He will never turn away from us if we will just return to Him with every fiber of our being.

Neither will He be thwarted. “The LORD shall go forth like a mighty man; He shall stir up His zeal like a man of war. He shall cry out, yes, shout aloud; He shall prevail against His enemies” (Isaiah 42:13 NKJV).

God will prevail against His enemies! He wins it all, and it would be smart to be on His side! His cry and shout have gone forth into the entire world. His cry *is* a shout—a passionately focused and concentrated shout defending what the enemy has threatened in the Church. Make no mistake about it; some things that Jesus considers to be of supreme importance in His Church are threatened almost to extinction. He is shouting from heaven: “Come back to Me! Get it right before Me!”

To get it right, we must ask ourselves: Is it all up to God because we are under grace in Christ? Has God done it all? Does He now expect nothing from us? Some would answer, “Yes,” but Scripture tells a different story.

“He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” (Revelation 3:22 NKJV).

Biblical Pattern of Relationship and Fellowship

Some in Christian circles accentuate the differences between relationship and fellowship. There are differences between the concepts, but I think they have been overemphasized. The Scripture teaches the governing truths of blood covenant, and reveals fellowship as our relationship to God. I like to call it relationship-fellowship.

A covenant is a relationship governed by compliance to the agreements sealed in blood. When one of the parties violates any agreement of the covenant, the relationship becomes broken and consequences follow. If we disobey, our covenant with God is never broken on *His* part; but our part of the covenant is affected when we refuse to act according to it.

So, as followers of the Lord Jesus, our relationship is based on His sacrifice. It is also based on our participation and fellowship, and on our walking according to the teachings of the New Covenant sealed in His blood.

The Old Testament was a covenant based on blood sacrifices and a relationship-fellowship based on obedience to the covenant’s commands. The great change for Christians is that Jesus offered *one* sacrifice *forever*. It never needs to be repeated; He died “once for all” (see Romans 6:10). Still, there are many New Covenant responsibilities for Christians!²

Some teach hard and long that we have a relationship with God, but can only break fellowship with Him. The relationship is often portrayed this way: “You may have a son. He is your son no matter what he does. If he does evil against you and is unfaithful, you can never say he is not your son. That is a picture of relationship. Now, your fellowship may be broken when your son acts foolishly, as the prodigal son did; but he is still your son.”

² See First John 1:5-10; 2:1-2; Romans 3:22-26; 6:1-23; First Corinthians 11:23-34; Hebrews 9:11-14, and others.

The point is understandable, but because it fails to take other scriptural realities into consideration, it is flawed. How? It only shows one side of the relationship-fellowship equation.

The Prodigal Son

I was a prodigal at one time and came back home, so I know something about the great love, grace, and mercy of God on my life. As a prodigal, I repeatedly violated almost every commandment in the Book. Therefore, my statements in this book are not based in my being “holier than thou.” I can identify with Paul’s statement about being chief among sinners (see First Timothy 1:15). I messed up royally in the past, but the blood of Jesus cleansed me completely when I repented, and the Lord put me in His restoration program (see First John 1:7-9).

Because I came back to Him, God was merciful toward my wayward, disobedient, and rebellious ways. When I truly humbled myself and repented, He received me into His loving arms. That is the bottom line revealed in the story of the prodigal son (see Luke 15:11-32). The story approximates my own, and I am thankful to have received my Father’s mercy!

The Father in heaven will never reject us; regardless of the sin³ we have indulged in—*as long as we return to Him*. The choice to come back is not His, but ours. He is waiting and looking for the faintest sign of our turning toward Him. If we are humble and repentant He will run out to meet us with His arms wide open, just as the prodigal’s father did.

These powerful truths from the story of the prodigal son are echoed elsewhere in Scripture:

God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5b NASB).

3 What is sin? Transgression of the law is sin (see 1 John 3:4 KJV). Literally, this phrase is translated, “lawlessness is sin.” Lawlessness is the rejection of God’s commandments, rules, and laws. Whatever is not of faith (trust in and faithfulness to God) is sin (see Rom. 14:23). If you know what is good but you fail to do it, that is sin (see James 4:17). These three statements identify what sin is. Sin is more than making a mistake or “missing the mark,” as the word was used in archery. Sin is not just missing one’s target. Sin means refusing to obey God’s commandments, rules, and laws, and acting unfaithfully and untrustworthily, knowing what is right but choosing to do wrong anyway.

Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up (James 4:10 NKJV).

Let the wicked one abandon his way and the sinful one his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, so He may have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will freely forgive (Isaiah 55:7 HCSB).

Regardless of how far we wander from our Father God, it is possible to repent and draw near to Him again. The prodigal's father did not condemn or criticize him, but forgave him, hugged him, and gave him back his place in the family. He put on his son's finger the ring signifying his place in his father's house. He placed on his son the robe representing his place of authority and righteousness before the father. The father rejoiced greatly over his son's return and wanted everyone to celebrate by having a "coming home" party, at the father's expense.

These are glorious truths and I thank God for them almost every day!

In the story of the prodigal, the father's heart provides insight into how the heavenly Father thinks about His children. He yearns for and loves His children, as any good earthly father would do. The compassion that human fathers feel for their children comes from God. It is something He put in real men. Those who still reflect some divine likeness feel a deep yearning and compassion for their offspring; it moves them to do whatever is necessary to love and protect them.

Mothers also have powerful inner yearnings for their children that are almost indescribable. Of course, there have been many perversions of godly parenthood, but I am talking about a seed that God placed in all human beings. He created them to love and care for their young!

I have wonderful triplet sons born in 2012. I cannot begin to describe the feelings and deep desire in me to bless, help, protect, and care for them. I want them to go higher in God and be better than their daddy at everything.

What a marvelous blessing and great treasure! We think and feel this way toward our children because our Father in heaven feels this way toward His children. "Like a father

has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps. 103:13 HCSB).

What happens when parents lose their children to drugs, violence, war, or other evils? They suffer terribly, their pain too deep for words to describe it. The horror of burying a child long before he or she reaches old age is an excruciatingly painful experience for parents.

One dear woman, a former member of our church, had a fifteen-year-old daughter who died tragically in an incident related to prescription drugs. The mother’s grief was so pronounced that I suffered with her, almost as though it had happened to me. Nothing could console her in her loss. It took a very long time for her pain to subside enough for her to get on with her life.

No doubt the father of the prodigal grieved, too. He felt that his son had died and he would not see him again. Can you imagine how he felt when, suddenly, he saw his boy coming down the road toward the house? The emotions, the compassion, the tears, the weeping, the rejoicing, and the love would be beyond description!

But while he was still far off, his father saw him, and was moved with compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. The son said to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” But the father said to his servants, “Quickly, bring out the best robe, and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. Bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat, and celebrate; for this, my son, was dead, and is alive again. He was lost, and is found.” They began to celebrate (Luke 15:20b-24).

When the father saw his given-up-for-dead boy coming home, it was rejoicing time! This is a picture of the heart of the Father. He loves beyond any measure and desires only the best for His children.

Two Categories of Children

Some instruction is needed regarding the difference between children who are aware of what is right and wrong and those who do wrong because they do not know any better.

The prodigal fell into the first category. We know he was an adult because he was old enough to ask for his inheritance and leave home. When older children do wrong, there are responsibilities and consequences for their actions that parents can no longer fix or overlook. Adult children who know better but choose to do evil anyway may be answerable to the powers that be. Parents can do little or nothing to intervene when their grown children violate the law of the land.

Did you notice that once the prodigal left home the father no longer pursued him? He sent no posse after his son; nor did he personally seek to find him and bring him home. The son was now a man; the father did not dispute his decision. Only when the prodigal repented and returned to his father's house did the father run out to meet him. Scripture bears this out saying: "Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8a HCSB). The Father is waiting for His older kids to repent and return to Him!

The situation with young children is completely different. When young children who don't know any better do wrong things, parents correct them, pick them up, love them, and move on. That is how God treats those who are younger in the Lord. They can mess up often, but God is right there to pick them up, clean them off, and move on their behalf.

Although God expects His mature children to draw near and get it right, when they disobey Him and leave His arms to go the world's way, they are not the only ones losing out. The Father feels the loss and wants the wayward to come back to Him!

God wants to take us in His arms and love on us every day. But for that to happen, we must be where He is. We cannot be where we choose doing whatever we want. That was the prodigal's mind-set when he left home and wasted his inheritance on debauchery. He had nothing left, just as we have nothing when we stray from Father's house.

The Father wants us to stay in His house! Christ, our ultimate example of faithfulness, "was faithful as a Son over His house—whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end" (Heb. 3:6 NASB).

There is no life, no fellowship, and no relationship away from the Father's house in Christ. Yet there are many prodigals today who have drifted from His love, grace, and

protection. As the prodigal did, they end up in the hog pens of life eating the husks meant for pigs, because Satan has blinded their eyes to the truth.

On one level, this book is dedicated to pulling the prodigals from the brink of destruction and back into the loving arms of the heavenly Father. However, there is much to discuss concerning what God wants and expects from the children in His house. Knowing His heart is the key to our relationship-fellowship with Him. Whatever adjustments He requires to our understanding of what it means to be sons and daughters of God—let’s make them!

The Sonship Taught in the Bible

This might surprise some, but Christians are not the only ones called “sons of God” in the Bible. Real sonship in the Scripture demands faith-faithfulness to God’s Word and covenant.⁴ God called Israel His sons in Isaiah 1:2.⁵ Isaiah revealed that when God’s covenant sons acted corruptly in wickedness and rebellion to His commandments they were under judgment until they repented. *Son* is a reference to any person who is in a covenant relationship with God. As long as Israel abided by the covenant, they had an inheritance and a place before God as His sons.⁶ Has our relationship-fellowship with God now become a one-sided type of sonship where it is His work alone? Are we Christians free of all covenant responsibilities under grace?

The New Testament teaches exactly the opposite! Our relationship with God is not a disproportionate one in which Christians are “sons” without faithfulness and loyalty to our heavenly Father.⁷ Just as God is eternally faithful and committed to us, so must our relationship-fellowship with Him and the Lord Jesus be free of unfaithfulness, adulterated lifestyles (devoid of zeal), and resistance to His way and will.

4 See Galatians 3:26 and Isaiah 1:2-20 from the New American Standard Bible (NASB).

5 *Sons* in Isaiah 1:2 should not be translated “children,” as in the King James Version and other versions. The Hebrew word in Isaiah 1:2 for sons is *banin*, the plural form of *ben* meaning “a son.” NASB correctly translates it “sons.” “Children” should be the translation for the Hebrew word *yeladim* (plural). There are other Hebrew words that refer to children at different stages. The children of Israel are literally the sons of Israel.

6 See also Exodus 4:22-23; First Chronicles 17:13; 22:10; Isaiah 43:6; 45:11; Jeremiah 3:19 and 10:20. Sonship is related to faithfulness and living according to God’s Word and covenant. Covenant sonship requires adherence to the commandments of the covenant.

7 Study Second Corinthians 6:14-18. God calls Himself the Father of those who touch not an unclean thing. Verses 14-16 will explain what Paul had in mind when referring to “unclean thing.” The Father welcomes as sons and daughters those living according to the standards Paul lays out here. God is not a Father to anyone practicing ungodliness, and they cannot consider themselves as His sons and daughters by any stretch of the imagination. Paul, the great teacher of God’s grace, taught this.

The Marriage Paradigm

Paul uses the earthly marriage relationship between a man and a woman to illustrate the heavenly relationship-fellowship between the Lord and His Church. The following passage from Ephesians explains what I mean:

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:22-33 NKJV).

The connection Paul describes between the earthly relationship and the heavenly one needs to be explored more deeply to address misunderstandings of grace. Some in our day say, "My relationship with God is different. It stands, regardless of how unfaithful I am or how much I sin."

Is that the truth, or has Satan lulled many into a false sense of relationship and fellowship? Notice the parallels Paul draws in Ephesians 5 between the earthly and heavenly relationships and consider some real-life questions:

- Men, would you stay in love with your wife if she were committing adultery over and over again? Would you readily take her back without any

repentance and restoration on her part? No self-respecting man would stay with a woman who makes no amends for infidelities, but expects her husband to overlook her sin. A woman who has no sorrow, grief, compunction, regret, humility, repentance, and does not vow to change, will not make it in that marriage. Divorce is almost assured.

- Have you ever seen a marriage remain healthy without any fellowship? How strong can a marriage be if the partners never talk or interact? What if they rarely have intimate moments? Can such a marriage survive, or is it in jeopardy of failing?
- Can a marriage survive if the partners are unfaithful and uncaring toward each other? Will it last if they fail to cherish one another? What if a husband mistreats his wife? Can a partner who abuses or deceives or shows no commitment to the marriage relationship expect the marriage to survive?

No, no, and no are the answers. Yet, in most modern Christian grace beliefs, it is assumed that our relationship with the Lord Jesus is safe no matter how unfaithful we are to Him.

It is true that couples often stay in dysfunctional marriages for the sake of society and the pressure it asserts on them. Some stay in dead marriages for reasons of political or religious correctness. But those are not real marriage relationships. Such marriages are lies and are based on lies.

Would Bridegroom Jesus be partner to a sham marriage?⁸ He is not and will not support a lie! He is the Truth through and through; no lie cannot exist in Him (see John 14:6; 1 John 2:21). Nor will Jesus present to Himself (upon His return to Earth) an unfaithful Bride—an unholy, unfaithful, rebellious, and ungodly Bride who is an adulteress and fornicator bent on dishonoring Him.

How could anybody believe that He would?

⁸ Jesus calls Himself the “bridegroom” in Matthew 9:15 and 25:1-10.

I know this is tough to hear, but it has to be said. It must be taught. Even with marriage reduced to a substandard idea in today's society, worldly folks have better sense than to accept unfaithfulness in the marriage relationship.

Do you think Jesus and the Father have less sense or more sense than the world?

All Christians should read the prophet Hosea, chapters 2 through 5, and Jeremiah chapter 3, where the marriage relationship is again set as an example of the relationship between God and His people. These passages teach that God despises infidelity from His own and sees unfaithfulness as making for a very bad marriage.

The analogy is the same one Paul uses, but Hosea and Jeremiah also teach about the consequences of such relationships. Unless there is true repentance and change, God wants no part of them. He gets no pleasure from a relationship when His "wife" breaks her vows and the marriage covenant.⁹

So has God's mind changed? No! Scripture says: "I, the LORD, do not change" (Mal. 3:6a NASB). He does not lower His standards, even when we do. The only way to correct the relational breach is through humility, wholehearted repentance, and the changing of the offender's ways. Nothing else will do; but if one truly repents, then God says the following:

I will heal their waywardness [apostasy]. I will love them freely; for my anger is turned away from him. I will be like the dew to Israel. He will blossom like the lily, and send down his roots like Lebanon. His branches will spread, and his beauty will be like the olive tree, and his fragrance like Lebanon. Men will dwell in his shade. They will revive like the grain, and blossom like the vine. Their fragrance will be like the wine of Lebanon (Hosea 14:4-7).

That is a beautiful picture of God's love and grace toward those who humble themselves and repent (see Hosea 14:1-2). Read also Jeremiah 3:12-19 and the kind and

⁹ See Hosea 6:7; 8:1. God calls marriage a covenant in Malachi 2:14. A marriage covenant requires fidelity, responsibility, and accountability from the marriage partners just as our covenant in the blood of Jesus does. If there were no responsibilities and requirements in the New Covenant then it would never qualify as a covenant.

loving invitation of the Father for His people to repent from their treacherous infidelity and ungodliness. His mercy endures forever! He will never reject the humble. He will always receive and restore the repentant with loving arms of approval, kindness, mercy, love, and His great grace or divine favor.

Do You Prefer Glorious or Unfaithful?

Sometimes sarcasm points out the absurdity all around us. The question above is relevant because some in Christendom have ideas about relationship and fellowship with God that are truly ridiculous.

We can agree, I think, that a husband would take issue with his marital relationship if his wife was found to be deceitful, unfaithful, rebellious, and fooling around with other men. Can you imagine a husband saying, “My wife’s adulterous affairs only involve her flesh (her body). They have nothing to do with our relationship. I overlook her infidelities because I know her heart, and her heart is right with me. She is really righteous on the inside, even if she is playing the harlot on the outside. Besides, her sins and iniquities are already forgiven. I don’t see them anyway.”

No man with his wits about him would make such bizarre statements in the face of huge breaches of trust, the marriage vows, and the marriage covenant. Yet in our day a similarly warped approach to our relationship with God is widely taught and passed off as sound doctrine and the “revelation of the hour.” Really, the idea is as old as the Fall into rebellion and sin.

Amazingly, misguided people only believe deranged ideas about relationship-fellowship while they are in their churches, deluded as their churches might be. They never believe such things on the street or at work! Do you know any woman who thinks it is OK for her husband to be a womanizer? Will the wife of a cheater say, “Hallelujah and praise the Lord?” No! (If she does, I submit that she needs to have her head examined!)

We must profoundly reassess our relationship with God according to the parallels drawn by Paul, Jeremiah, and Hosea. Let’s correct our ideas about our relationship-fellowship with God by accepting the examples laid out in the Word. We must get rid of

strange theology that has some churches and ministers seduced by an unprincipled form of Christianity.

Jesus is waiting to “*present...to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but...holy and without blemish*” (Eph. 5:27 KJV). Does it sound like He will be perfectly satisfied with a lying, cheating, faithless, Bride, and will take her to heaven in that state?

Sorry, but a Bride who is glorious, holy, and unblemished and a Bride who is an unfaithful adulteress are *not* same thing to God—not even close.

The Condition of Some in the Church

James, the half-brother of Jesus said that some in the Church need to humble themselves, repent, and get right with God. The Holy Spirit’s confrontation through James is very similar to the Lord’s confrontation of Israel, Judah, and Ephraim in the book of Hosea. The text is piercing, so brace yourself, and pay close attention to what the Holy Spirit is saying:

Adulterers, do you not know that friendship with the world means hostility toward God? So whoever decides to be the world’s friend makes himself God’s enemy. Or do you think the scripture means nothing when it says, “The spirit that God caused to live within us has an envious yearning”? But he gives greater grace. Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but he gives grace to the humble.” So submit to God. But resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and make your hearts pure, you double-minded. Grieve, mourn, and weep. Turn your laughter into mourning and your joy into despair. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you (James 4:4-10 NET).

Generally speaking, the Church has pulled “resist the devil and he will flee from you” out of its proper context. What surrounds that portion of verse 7 clearly indicates that, for apostates who refuse to humble themselves and submit to God, resisting the devil

and expecting him to flee will not work. Unless they draw near to God, cleanse their hands, purify their hearts, and humble themselves, resisting the devil is futile.

Did you notice the part about friendship with the world making us enemies of God? Did you see what James says about adulterers being those who are in agreement with the world? We Christians are called to humble ourselves, submit to God, draw near to Him, cleanse our hands, and purify our hearts from double mindedness. Being *double-minded* means attempting to trust God and serve Him on the one hand, while acting and living worldly on the other. It is a form of spiritual adultery; therefore it makes us enemies of God. We must be single-minded; the mind of trust cannot be mixed with the worldly mind.

Friends of God are holy and undefiled. We should look to be friends of God as Abraham was (see James 2:23). Friendship with God is pure and clean. It is humble and submissive to the Lord. Friendship means that we draw near to Him. We seek Him. We invite Him in. We communicate with Him. We are committed to Him. We want all He wants for us. We care for and love what He loves. We are united in purpose and in desire.

This is real friendship: He cares for me, and I care for all He cares about. He loves me, and I love Him.

Faithful until Death

Here is another aspect of the marriage relationship. I hope it profoundly strikes your spirit. When two people exchange vows, they promise to be faithful and to care for each other, “Until death do us part.” They vow their commitment, trust, and love. They vow that their love and intimate affection will be shared only with one another.

That is what we are supposed to do when we make Jesus the Lord of our lives (see Rom. 10:9). It is a vow of unbreakable trust and commitment to our Lord until physical death separates us from this earthly life. So, for example, as long as I am on this earth, my “sworn” allegiance is solely to the Lord Jesus in every area of my life! I have pledged my life, and all I am or will ever be, to Him only. That is the commitment I made when I declared Him to be my Lord. According to the Scripture, this is how I must live!

Be faithful to death, and I will give you the crown of life (Revelation 2:10d).

They overcame him because of the Lamb's blood, and because of the word of their testimony. They did not love their life, even to death (Revelation 12:11).

For as long as we live on earth we commit to the Lord a relationship-fellowship of unwavering love, trust, obedience, submission, humility, and faithfulness. That is what being saved is all about. That kind of relationship-fellowship will give us the crown of life!

Please notice: it was not I who said that, but Jesus. Notice also the anointed words written by the apostle Paul about how we are to be presented to the Lord on the day of His return:

For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy, because I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that just as the serpent deceived Eve by his treachery, your minds may be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2-3 NET).

Satan deceived Eve through ungodly cleverness: he got her thinking that by violating God's commandment she would get something better (see Gen. 3). There is never *anything* better on the other side of violating God's Word. Eve and Adam received the penalty of disobedience—spiritual and physical death. The wages of sin were death then and have been throughout history (see Rom. 6:23).

Jesus came to deliver us from the penalty of Adam and Eve's sin. It is washed away in the new birth and regeneration of the Holy Spirit; but the story of the Christian life does not end there. In Christ, every believer has New Covenant responsibilities.

Look again at the passage we just read from Second Corinthians 11. The apostle Paul mentioned the word *pure* twice. This Church-Bride is to be like a pure virgin with a pure devotion to Christ, free from all hypocrisy (sincere). This purity excludes anything that would make her unclean, impure, or defiled (corrupted). Paul's analogy is of a chaste

virgin on her wedding day. She does not have other lovers! She keeps herself holy and untouched for the one she is to marry.

That is the way the Church should be when Jesus comes!

Our relationship-fellowship is to be well-maintained and intimately united to love, admiration, respect, honor, faithfulness, commitment, communication, and submission to His will and way. If any of these are lacking, our relationship-fellowship is affected, just as it would be in marriage. (Remember that both relationships are governed by covenant.)

Never forget these facts. Let no one fool you into thinking they are unimportant to our relationship with God and our Lord Jesus. They are as important to our relationship-fellowship with the Lord as they are to a healthy marriage here on Earth.

The Revival of Lawlessness

Are you a law-abiding citizen or an outlaw? I think of myself as law-abiding. You probably do, too. I am not in trouble with the law of the land, and I like it that way. Ducking from the law and looking over my shoulder for fear of getting caught would be no way to live.

Sometimes, law-abiding citizens fear getting caught, even when they are doing nothing wrong. When you see a police car on the side of the road you are on, do you hit the accelerator or your brakes? If you are like me, you slow down even though you are not speeding. Isn't that true?

And when the police car behind you lights up like a Christmas tree and sounds its siren, you get nervous. "Oh no! What did I do? Why is the officer pulling me over?" you wonder. Then you catch yourself and say, "Wait a minute. I've done nothing wrong. The police must be after someone else."

As the patrol car swerves around you and into the sunset, you breathe a sigh of relief.

The principal's office had a similar effect on me. I remember the place vividly, having been a specially invited guest there on several occasions! My own aunt Nelly was the principal at a school I attended in Puerto Rico. Even so, I shook the first time I was escorted to her office. I punched and kicked a student who pushed a girl down the stairs. Thankfully, they peeled me off him before I did any serious damage.

Immediately, I was called to the five-foot-one-inch principal's office. I feared her, despite her small stature and the fact that she was my relative. She suspended me for a week. Then I had to face Mom and Dad at home. It was a bad day for me.

There were other times when I was called to the principal's office, not because I was in trouble, but for other more positive reasons. Still, I felt a respectful fear of the place—and relief that I was not in trouble.

Teaching Right and Wrong

We have the nervous feelings just described because we *know* there is a difference between right and wrong. Deep down, we all want to be on the side of what's right. That is WHY we must teach, correct, and instruct our children. (Proverbs 19:18, 29:17) Unless we correct children beginning when they are young, we will pay the price when they get older. (Proverbs 22:6, 29:15) The rod of correction or discipline will drive out foolishness from the heart of a child! (Prov. 22:15) If you don't spank your child and correct him or her from doing evil, you hate that child! (Prov. 13:24, 23:13, 14) Did you know that?

If you don't like that because you follow the idiocy of psychobabble even among "Christian" authors, argue with the Bible! Just ask some parents who let their children do as they pleased while growing up or just corrected with words alone. These parents know firsthand what happens when moral principles and respect for the law are not instilled early on. You reap wild and rebellious, demon-possessed children, and it would be your own fault for not following the Bible!

We are seeing a generation of young people who are aware of few, if any, moral guidelines. God is the least of their thoughts. Many of them believe that freedom means "no rules," and laws were meant to be broken. Gangs, drugs, teenage pregnancies, promiscuity, homosexuality, hatred, violence, and sometimes murder are seen in schools and among school-age children. Mamas and the daddies are weeping over their kids' severe problems, BUT it is their own fault. It is not compassion to avoid spankings! It is a demonstration of hatred towards God's Word!

I truly feel sorry for them for them. I served in the pastorate from 1976 through 1993—three years on Merritt Island in Florida, and fourteen years in Santurce, Puerto Rico. Santurce, *parada dieciocho* (or bus stop 18), behind the US Post Office, was a rough section of the San Juan metropolitan area. We started our church one street down from Trastalleres, one of the meanest, most drug-infested inner city areas of all. Many tough characters of all ages came through that church while it was at that location, and many gave their lives to Jesus!

One man whom we will call Carlos was a former undercover government agent who left government service to become a drug trafficker. Carlos never spoke of his past; he took his secrets to heaven with him. But as the hearsay goes, he found what he thought

was his real calling in life: to be a “fixer” for the drug runners. The saying in the underworld was, “Call Carlos. He can make your problem go away!”

This man had a gift for helping people, but until he came to the Lord he wildly misused it. In the mid-1980s, he found Jesus and his life changed dramatically. He became a model man of God, but with a slight “hit man” streak.

When an ungodly man was abusing his wife (a member of our church), I knew we had to do something quickly. The abuser was the devil incarnate, an extremely dangerous individual involved with some very gruesome activities. The former hit man overheard me talking about the problem with the abused woman. By this time, he was my friend and a great helper at the church. He was using his gift for the glory of God.

With a sly smile and a twinkle in his eye he said, “I can make this guy (the abuser) disappear and nobody will ever know what happened to him. Just say the word. I can handle that guy permanently.”

He asked my permission to commit murder! He was so polite that you could easily forget how capable he was of “solving the problem” without blinking. In his past life, he made Rambo look like a kindergarten teacher and Conan the Barbarian look like Miss Piggy!

As the pastor of a church of around three thousand members, I thought I had heard everything. But this was something else. I begged the former hit man not to murder the abuser, though honestly, the idea was tempting. Don’t get sanctimonious on me. I am sure there were times you wanted to yield to your feelings and do something ugly.

I despise abusers, but I cannot agree to murder—especially as the pastor who is supposed to be an example for the church. Imagine the headlines: “Pastor Hires Hit Man to Dismember Husband of Church Member!” A local paper, *El Vocero*, loved running such stories. This one would have made the front page!

I reminded the former fixer that he was a Christian and murder was against God’s commandments. Though he was very disappointed, he agreed that he loved Jesus more than anything from his past. He repented, and I was relieved. Thank God, we were able to resolve the situation without murdering anyone!

My point is that unless we teach the truth, ideas of right and wrong can become jumbled. Murdering a brutal, wife-beating man can seem right to the deceived mind.¹⁰ I am no pacifist, and if the man was killed while someone was stopping the abuse, then that would not be murder, but to go out and purposely kill the abuser in cold blood, that is another story.

In our rough neighborhood, many people had wrong ideas. Too many parents suffered tragedies with their kids, as parents in such towns often do. Always, there was a common denominator: young people who joined gangs or used drugs practically raised themselves. They had little or no instruction concerning moral guidelines. They saw no example of God's principles in the home. Often they lived in single-parent households in which parents had no choice but to work day and night to survive. Some parents lived ungodly lives themselves, teaching their children unlawful behavior by example. Then television and other media reinforced the bad example.

As tough a town as it was, I saw the opposite common denominator among children who were raised to live by God's guidelines and respect moral authority. Most of them, even when they strayed a bit, came back to God. Many stayed with the Lord and never quit. Some are in ministry or in ministry-related work. Others are strong believers with beautiful families. Few if any got into any real trouble, although there were a couple of hardheaded ones.

It is heartbreaking to have a son or daughter end up in prison or die because of their rebellion and hatred for law and order. Many in our world have lost all respect for the good laws of men, and care even less about God's rules. I believe our planet is seeing the greatest revival of lawlessness since the days of Noah.

¹⁰ That being stated, I believe in self-defense. What if you were forced to defend your life against a violent attacker, and without intending to do so, you killed the attacker? Would that be murder? No it is not. I am not a proponent of pacifism, and do not believe in being a doormat for the world and its violent thugs. When Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek," He was not referring to an encounter with a knife- or gun-wielding heathen bent on destruction. These verses in Matthew 5:38-48 have been misapplied and twisted to uphold a pacifist ideology. Jesus was speaking to covenant people about covenant relationships. He was not teaching us to receive willingly and accept passively a home-invading hoodlum who attempts to steal, kill and destroy at gunpoint. Jesus was not telling us to accept the evil the world attempts to lay at our doorsteps. That would violate numerous Scripture references that say exactly the opposite! Many incorrect interpretations have suggested that Jesus was a pacifist. He was not! Scriptural covenant peace and pacifism are two entirely different ideas on opposite ends of the spectrum! Jesus was referring to brothers or sisters in the Lord who become evil and slap you. Then He said we are to love our enemies—not a hoodlum in this context, but a brother or sister who becomes an enemy to us. Jesus said that your enemies would sometimes be those of your own household (see Matt. 10:36). The word translated "enemies" is the same in Matthew 5:44 and 10:36. The household to which Jesus refers is His own. The Greek word for household is *oikiakos*, used only one other time in the New Testament (see Matt. 10:25). There is much more to say about this, but this is not the place for it.

Jesus prophesied this before He went to the cross.

When the Son of Man comes again, it will be exactly like the days of Noah. In the days before the flood, people were eating, drinking, and getting married until the day that Noah went into the ship. They were not aware of what was happening until the flood came and swept all of them away. That is how it will be when the Son of Man comes again (Matthew 24:37-39 GW).

Many don't have any idea how close we are to the coming of the Lord. Others lead immoral and lawless lives as though Jesus were never coming back. Those who continue in lawless living will find out too late, as the lawless did in Noah's day. Jesus warned that the scenario would repeat itself and referred on a number of occasions to things that would make the world a very dangerous place.¹¹

As we come closer to the coming of the Lord, a lawlessness revival will be loosed on the earth even as an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the glory of God is seen. These are two revivals: one for the benefit of God and His kingdom; one that will lead many into darkness and eternal separation from God.

Have you noticed the stepped-up effort in most countries to throw God and His moral rules out from schools and government institutions? I remember a day when Bible was taught in the public school system and the Ten Commandments were proudly displayed on schoolhouse walls and government buildings. (I really dated myself with that comment!)

Now, in the United States, for example, the Ten Commandments and Bible studies were taken out of public schools. We see the evil results of this loss. Lawless behavior, disrespect for authority, and darkness prevail in many schools. Instead of being famous for their model students, some of the worst schools gain notoriety as models of lawlessness.

Lawlessness is spreading like an unchecked and deadly virus.

¹¹ See Luke 21; Matthew 24; John 16:1-3; and other passages.

What Is Lawlessness?

Our understanding of lawlessness often differs from the more comprehensive concept revealed in the New Testament. The term is often overlooked even there, and it is rare to hear teaching on it. In almost forty years as a Christian, I have rarely heard anybody teach on lawlessness, with one main exception—my earthly father, Israel. I heard him teach on it several times.

The word *lawlessness* has important connotations for the Church today; so pay attention and do not dismiss New Testament verses that mention it. These scriptures are pertinent, and it is imperative that we know exactly what lawlessness is. The following list of definitions will help define the concept. The compilation is based on important scholarly dictionaries:¹²

- *Lawlessness* means to be without law toward God, but also having contempt (hatred, dislike, disdain, disapproval) for God’s law.
- *Lawless* describes those who do away with all commandments and throw the restraints of biblical morality to the wind. *Lawlessness* refers to the condition or state of being without any law or moral restraints.
- *Lawlessness* embodies the idea that Christians can live without laws.
- *Lawlessness* is sometimes translated as “iniquity” or “transgression,” and refers to sin. The apostle John said that both sin and its practice are lawlessness (see 1 John 3:4).
- *Lawlessness* rejects all moral laws and commandments.
- Hating *lawlessness* and loving righteousness were major keys to the anointing Jesus had on His life and ministry on Earth (see Heb. 1:9; Acts 10:38). Jesus hated lawlessness! Shouldn’t we follow His example?

¹² Based on the Greek, *anomia*; *anomos* is the masculine form of the word. See Thayer’s G458 (from G459); TDNT 4:1085, 646; BAGD 71d-72a. My definitions are based on these dictionaries.

This is a heavy topic. Jesus said that some (who were once used by God in the miraculous) would be told on the Day of Judgment: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!” (Matt. 7:23 NKJV).

These are not people who committed sin and then repented. God forbid! We would all be in a mess, because we have all sinned. We must, however, repent! Jesus pointed out those who *practiced* the business of sin. This is not the occasional sin committed by His followers. This is the activity of those who work at sinning as a daily routine.

This is one very real aspect of lawlessness. But all sin is lawlessness, so we must be quick to repent¹³ and not take our time in making it right with Him (see 1 John 1:9 and 2:1). When we sin, we should run to our Advocate in heaven and confess! He is ready to forgive, cleanse us, and even forget our sin *if* we repent!

Lawlessness is a grave condition—so grave that the Lord Jesus said this:

*The Son of Man [Jesus] will send out His angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom [rule and dominion] all things that cause stumbling [to others] and those who do iniquity [those who do or practice lawlessness—the state of being without law or moral restraints—and despise and reject God’s moral laws], and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear (Matthew 13:41-43).*¹⁴

Was Jesus talking about gathering the lawless to live forever in His presence? How could anyone so distort this straightforward statement of Jesus? Does the idea of a “furnace of fire” where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” sound anything like, “Welcome to heaven and have a nice forever”?

Yet some have arrived at that twisted conclusion. It is hard to believe, especially in the light of passages like Matthew 13! There is much truth-twisting going on!

¹³ See Second Peter 3:9; Romans 2:4; Revelation 2:5, 16, 21, 22; 3:3, 19; Second Corinthians 7:9-10; Second Timothy 2:25.

¹⁴ These verses are similar in many respects to the message given to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. They also give us additional insight into what happens at the White Throne Judgment in Revelation 20.

Being cast into a furnace of fire refers to the lake of fire mentioned in Revelation 20 and 21. That is what happens to those who practice lawlessness and lead others to sin.¹⁵ We need to straighten up our thinking and heed the warning of the Holy Spirit spoken by Jesus.

Do you believe His words? Do you love and obey His teachings? Do you think He was right, or do you follow those who ignore, belittle, and reject His teachings? Believe it or not, some ministers reject the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. They say it is irrelevant today because Jesus was speaking to people who were “under the law.”

Let Jesus and His words be true and every man a liar! (See Romans 3:4.) I will trust the Word of the Lord through the mouth of Jesus. How about you?

Let’s continue, noticing that Jesus did not say that those declared righteous (because of His sacrifice) were immune from this judgment. Yes, they were saved by grace; but only those who stay within the boundaries of the blood of Jesus and the covenant are kept from judgment. Those who step outside of these lawful boundaries—those practicing lawlessness and leading others into sin—have no such assurance.

These two groups will be ushered to the lake of fire! You see, there are definite spiritual and physical boundaries for the New Testament blood-bought saint. I will help you to discover some of them in this book. They are crucial because Jesus has not changed His mind about Matthew 13:41-43—not even for those of us under grace today. “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever!” (Heb. 13:8 HCSB).

These are not new issues. Let’s remind ourselves that the errors of Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2 were so dangerous that they were addressed quickly and severely by the Head of the Church. These errors were leading servants of God into sin and lawlessness. Notice, by the way, that the warnings stated in Revelation 2 were not issued to the world, but the Church!

Matthew 13:41-43 is applicable to all, including the Church. Anyone leading others to sin and practicing lawlessness will be under this judgment. I pray that all who hear this

¹⁵ See Revelation 20:11-15; 21:8.

warning from the lips of the Master will heed it and come to repentance quickly, for “what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship does light have with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14b NET).

The answer to Paul’s question is that lawlessness and righteousness have nothing in common. Lawlessness means being without law or moral restraints (rejecting all moral laws and commandments). So what is righteousness in Paul’s context? It refers to *having* and *living* according to God’s moral laws and holy commandments. Righteousness accepts, receives, and acts according to God’s rules.

John adds to our understanding:

Little children, let no one deceive you: The one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as Jesus is righteous. The one who practices sin is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was revealed: to destroy the works of the devil. (1 John 3:7-8 NET).

Don’t let anybody deceive you! Those who practice sin are of the devil. Those who practice righteousness are of God. Those who say they are righteous and at the same time practice sin (lawlessness) are liars. What they practice demonstrates to whom they belong. “Everyone who practices sin also practices lawlessness; indeed, sin is lawlessness” (1 John 3:4 NET).¹⁶

There is no grey area between lawlessness and righteousness. *Bauer’s Greek-English Dictionary* states that lawlessness speaks of those who despise and reject the law of God. The definition given by the *Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon* for the word *lawlessness* is: “lawless conduct” and “the negation [*i.e.*, denegation, annulment, repudiation, rejection¹⁷] of law.”¹⁸ According to Liddell and Scott, lawlessness is the opposite of righteousness. Ancient Greeks also used these words as exact opposites, as did the writers of the New Testament.

¹⁶ A *Greek-English Lexicon* by Liddell and Scott states that *anomia* (lawlessness) is the opposite of *dikaiosune* (righteousness). See also BAGD 71d-72ab.

¹⁷ Merriam-Webster Online, *Merriam-Webster Online Thesaurus 2014*, s.v. “negation,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/thesaurus/negation?show=0&t=1410276392> (accessed September 25, 2014).

¹⁸ A *Greek-English Lexicon* s.v., 145b.

Do you see the clear distinction between those who practice righteousness and those who are lawless? Does the truth of their being diametrically opposed to each other support the idea that you can be righteous no matter how much sin you practice? Our word study alone should assure you that you cannot be righteous and lawless at the same time. Receiving righteousness as a free gift and living in unrighteousness do not mix. Those who attempt to blend the two are mixed up! In the epistles, righteousness is as much a gift as it is doing what is right according to God's holy commandments.¹⁹

The biblical separation between righteousness and wickedness (lawlessness), and between the righteous and unrighteous has always existed.²⁰ The lines have never been blurred. They are clearly demarcated in Scripture. There are no grey areas with God. You are one or the other, but never can you be both at the same time.

Making Way for the Man of Lawlessness

If you truly love the Lord you should reject any movement or teaching advocating any form of lawlessness. If you reject commandments and moral divine rules as “works of the law” that are unnecessary for the Christian under grace, then you are setting the stage for the man of lawlessness²¹ to appear. In other words, if you accept lawlessness, you are agreeing with the man of lawlessness whom Satan is setting up as his personal representative on the earth.

That is very bad company to be in, because the Lord has nothing good to say about this deceiver.

19 See Romans 5:17; 6:13; 7:12. Sin negatively affects and restricts the righteousness received by believers as a free gift. There is a process of faith in the blood of Jesus for believers who sin: confession of their sin and the receiving of cleansing and forgiveness in the blood bring cleansing from unrighteousness and the restoration of righteousness. Note closely First John 1:7-10 and 2:1-2.

20 As an example see Proverbs and note how the righteous and wicked (lawless) are always differentiated as exact opposites of each other. See Proverbs 3:33; 10:3, 6, 7, 11, 16, 20, 24, 25, 28, 30, 32; 11:8, 10, 23, 31; 12:3, 5, 7, etc. See Psalms for numerous mentions on the same subject. Also look at Ezekiel 3:18-21; 18:5-26; 33:12-18. Let me repeat it again: The free gift of righteousness for the believer in Christ should not be separated from doing righteousness. To attempt to separate them is a perversion of the truth concerning righteousness in the Scripture. See Zvi H. Szubin and Louis Jacobs. “Righteousness,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., Vol. 17, Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, eds. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 307-309, Gale Virtual Reference Library, Web, <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CCX2587516757&v=2.1&u=imcpl1111&it=r&p=GVRL&sw=w&asid=1c26d904cc0050084a76377c39c24979> (August 24, 2014). See also, James D. G. Dunn: *The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification*, *Journal Theological Studies* (1992) 43 (1): 1-22 doi:10.1093/jts/43.1.1. (pgs. 16-21).

21 *Anomos* (Strong's G459) is simply the masculine form of the word. *Anomia* (Strong's G458) is in the feminine form, and comes from this word *anomos*. Whether masculine or feminine, the definition does not change. See Thayer's 48c,d, TDNT 4:1085-1086; and BAGD 71d, 72a.

We have respectful fear of many things. We think earthquake-prone areas are dangerous, which of course, they can be. We recognize the potential perils of hurricanes or typhoons. Many have perished in these storms, but many have survived them without a scratch, as I can personally attest. Everyone believes war is hazardous, and it is. But many have survived even war.

There is one place on the planet that will be deadly for everyone, and that is wherever the man of lawlessness is. Agreeing with him is the most dangerous “place” on the planet. He will be killed with the breath of the mouth of the Lord and destroyed by the manifestation of His coming (see 2 Thess. 2:8). This judgment is eminent and unchangeable, and will be terrible for anybody who stands in agreement with the lawless one.

Let no one deceive you in any way. For it will not be, unless the departure [apostasy] comes first, and the man of lawlessness [see footnotes 13 and 22] is revealed, the son of destruction, he who opposes and exalts himself against all that is called God or that is worshiped; so that he sits in the temple of God, setting himself up as God. ...Now you know what is restraining him, to the end that he may be revealed in his own season. For the mystery of lawlessness already works. Only there is one who restrains now, until he is taken out of the way. Then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will kill with the breath of his mouth, and destroy by the manifestation of his coming; even he whose coming is according to the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, and with all deception of wickedness for those who are being lost, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. Because of this, God sends them a working of error, that they should believe a lie; that they all might be judged who did not believe the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4; 6-12).

Paul begins this teaching by stating, “Let no one deceive you in any way.” I pray that the Body of Christ will awaken from its slumber of deceptive preaching and teaching about lawlessness. To deny the validity of God’s holy commandments and moral laws in

Scripture because we are under grace is to allow lawlessness to rule and reign. It starts with God's people. It spreads from there to the community, the city, and the nation.

Think what will happen when lawlessness is the condition of your nation. Evil will break out and finally prevail. Lawless countries are lands full of darkness, death, and destruction. Anarchy dominates when the rule of law is removed or no longer enforced. Historically, we have seen nations go from coup d'état, to civil war, to the breakdown of government and civil authority, and finally to all hell breaking loose. We have read or heard the tragic stories of indiscriminate murders, rapes, lootings, shootings, dismemberments, hangings, and more evil things that have prevailed in lawless lands.

Knowing the devastation that lawlessness brings, it is shocking to hear "Christian" sermons that promote it instead of restraining it. Some are rejecting God's commandments. They are buying into a perversion of Christianity that lacks any respect or honor for God's Word. This is far from the faith that "was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Now it is becoming the lifestyle of those who call themselves saints but are not saints! They are far less than saints because they dismiss God's idea of morality.

Are you a saint or one who uses the title without living the part? Don't look around. I am talking to you. Are you looking in the mirror? Remember, only you can change what you see. The written and prophetic Word is your mirror. It shows you where and who you are. It is your choice to obey it and be blessed, or to disobey it and reap the bitter fruit of your ways.

A Prophetic Wake-Up Call

Ephesians 5 issues a prophetic wake-up call from the Holy Spirit. Because we are coming closer to the coming of the Lord, this call is even more important now than it was when the apostle Paul penned it.

Do *you* want a word from the Lord? Do you want marching orders that can stand for the rest of your life? Here they are:

Among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy

people [the saints]. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person—such a person is an idolater—has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.²² For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live²³ as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is (Ephesians 5:3-17 NIV).

These marching orders will help you next year and every year to come! They demonstrate the complete dissimilarity between righteousness and immoral-sinful behavior, and between light and darkness. The passage makes clear the world of difference between God’s saints and those who are not. I submit that you would need help from the devil to misunderstand Paul’s crystal-clear comments.

That help has been forthcoming for many believers lulled by deception into a false sense of security. They think grace makes them acceptable to God despite their sinful and

22 This means that those who call themselves Christians but are practicing the same things as the children of disobedience will be under God’s wrath just as those living in disobedience. To be a child of disobedience means living actively in disobedience. The disobedience Paul is referring to is the sinful activities in the previous verses. This is an important observation because there is a prevalent thought in much of Christianity that a believer could never be subject to God’s wrath regardless of how much sin they practice. This verse contradicts that thinking.

23 Literally “walk,” but it does mean how you live, as translated by the NIV. Anytime Paul admonishes us to walk in a certain way, he is speaking of our lifestyle or manner of behavior. See for example: Deuteronomy 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 26:17; 28:9; Psalms 1:1; 78:10; 81:12-13; 84:11; 119:1, 3; 35, 143:8; and more than 100 references. Walking as children of light means living in obedience to God and the Lord Jesus and not participating in those things practiced by the children of disobedience.

unrighteous practices. But the sexually immoral, unclean, covetous, and idolaters have no part in the kingdom of Jesus and the Father!

Don't let anybody fool you with lies about God's marvelous grace! It is time to renounce the unfruitful works of darkness and have no fellowship with them! It is time to awake and arise from the dead junk of this world and let Christ shine on us and through us to others. It is time to watch carefully how we walk!

It is time to wake up!

The Revival of Lawlessness—Part 2

Before the man of lawlessness can appear there will be a great falling away from the faith—an apostasy.²⁴ If only we did not need to talk about this. Yet we *must*. In fact, we are seeing it today. On some fronts many are coming into the kingdom of God. Small and great revivals are happening all over the planet. At the same time, many are deceived and falling away from the faith.

Let me be clear about this falling away. It does not refer to those who embrace lower-level doctrinal errors or traditional ideas that *do not* lead people into sin and lawlessness. The falling away involves those who depart from the foundational truths of God’s Word and are led into sinful lifestyles.

This is serious business that does not go unnoticed by the Head of the Church, the Lord Jesus. He sees and He will go to war, as His words attest regarding His Church’s deceptions by the Nicolaitans, Balaam, and Jezebel (see Rev. 2:6, 14, 15, 20). Notice that these are deceptions *within* the ranks of God’s people. Judgment begins in the household of the Lord (see 1 Pet. 4:17).

The most prominent current deception espouses freedom from covenantal moral obligations and the keeping of God’s holy commandments. Some call it “pure grace,” but it is moving many to depart from righteousness into unrighteousness, and from light back into darkness. Jesus will not look the other way.

The following portion of Scripture vividly describes what we are seeing, and it isn’t pretty.

If, after they have escaped the defilement of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in it and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than, after knowing it, to turn back from the holy

24 In the Greek, *apostasia*—Thayer’s and Strong’s G646, BAGD 98b.

commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “The dog returns to his own vomit again,” and, “the sow that has washed to wallowing in the mire” (2 Peter 2:20-22).

The Spirit of the Lord spoke in my heart about end-time apostasy messages; some are unfolding now and some are yet to come. We are specifically addressing the message of “zero rules” that is being passed off as the “gospel.” It is not the gospel, and those who believe it are yielding to a spirit of apostasy.

The great falling away has begun!

The Mystery of Lawlessness

The *mystery* of lawlessness and the great mystery called “the harlot” of Babylon in Revelation 17 reveal the same kind of deception. At Babylon people first came into unity to build a tower to the heavens (see Gen. 11). They decided how they would reach their idea of god: they set their own ways and rejected the true God’s instructions, commandments, and divine ordinances.

This ancient attempt was the beginning of establishing the mystery of lawlessness. The unity of the people in trying to reach heaven by their own devices was supposed to produce power but resulted in confusion.²⁵

Does this sound like today’s world? Do we see confusion about God and His ways? You know that we do.

We cannot get to God by any means apart from His appointed way. We cannot and will not fellowship with God without following His orders and commandments. God has provided the way; His name is Jesus—the way, the truth, and the life (see John 14:6). Jesus said: “The person who has my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me...” (John 14:21a NET).

That is God’s way, and a genuine love of God obeys it!

The word *mystery* is the key to unlocking the mystery of lawlessness. Notice the words that are written on the harlot’s forehead: “MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT,

25 Babylon was the infamous Babel in Genesis 11. Babel means “confusion,” from which the word Babylon is derived (see Strong’s H894).

THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev. 17:5 KJV). Satan has worked on this diabolical plan by keeping it under wraps until its “revelation” to the world. *Mystery* speaks of something hidden with the express purpose of revealing it at a certain time. This so-called mystery has been working in darkness for ages, right under our noses. It is a religious system of unbridled immorality that will be judged by God when its manifestation is full. It has already reared its ugly head in our time.

The stage is being set for this false religion and the incorporation of all religions into a universally accepted religious order which accepts everyone regardless of sexual orientation, relaxes most biblical and moral principles, and rejects Scripture. The door is opening for the mystery of lawlessness to appear.

Please do not surmise that I take a negative view of all that is happening worldwide. No! God is doing mighty things at all levels. Revivals are breaking out and will continue and increase until the coming of the Lord. Yet the Lord is addressing certain things by His Spirit so His people will be prepared for His coming. The demonic apostasy that Christians have embraced *has to go* before Jesus returns!

The message that God’s commandments are irrelevant for Christians is part of the problem. If commandments are irrelevant then God’s idea of morality is diminished in importance. This message makes it much easier for people to accept immoral behavior as OK. It lines up with universalism and its claim that, because of love, all will be saved in the end regardless of immoral behavior and lifestyle.

Let’s get it straight: evil is evil, and good is good. We should feel strongly about both if we believe the Scripture. Yet it is trendy to say that love is all-inclusive regardless of lifestyle. This is a disturbing anti-Christ movement toward the strange teachings of lawlessness and universalism that oppose one of the foundational truths of the Church: eternal punishment (see Heb. 6:1-3). Like a freight train without brakes, these doctrinal views are speeding down a steep hill toward destruction!

Universalist-leaning theologies reject chapters 19 through 21 of the book of Revelation. Eternal punishment contradicts their concept of all-inclusive love. Yet these chapters are still found in every Christian Bible, everywhere on the planet. Universalists

use the love of God as a rationale, but they are ignorant of what God’s love is truly about. And those who teach any form of lawless Christian lifestyles are following in their footsteps! This is the tradition of lawlessness; these groups are attempting to reach God via towers of their own making. They reject the truth of all Scripture and only believe those parts of the Bible that, when seen out of context, appear to bolster their lawless beliefs!

Restraining the Mystery of Lawlessness

Worldwide, some of God’s precious people in the Church are restraining this “mystery of lawlessness” by ministering the Word of God in truth and love so that the man of lawlessness²⁶ is kept from appearing on the scene. The Lord is using these anointed ministers, saints, ministries, and churches to light revival fires and spread His truth.

These believers are on the forefront of restraining the mystery of lawlessness. One day, however, they will be removed and the restraining will end, according to Second Thessalonians 2:3-12. Once the restraining factor is removed the apostasy of lawlessness will have free reign. Then the man of lawlessness will appear and deceive many. His evil reign will be short-lived, however, because the Lord will consume him with the fire and glory of His second coming. Regardless of your view on the timing of these events, we can agree that many anointed voices have been raised by God to oppose the false message of lawlessness. The Father will have His way at the coming of the Lord Jesus. No one will be able to stop His return! I don’t believe it is time for the man of lawlessness to appear, but I would not mind one bit if the Lord returned to rule and reign on the earth sooner than I expect!

So, when he that restrains leaves the earth, events will be set in motion for the rest of Second Thessalonians chapter 2 to unfold. Lawlessness²⁷ will be the rule of the land, and anything and everything that resembles God’s moral commands will be discarded. The

26 The Scripture says there are many antichrists (see 1 John 2:18). So which one is it? Is it one or many? I believe there will be one main man of lawlessness (antichrist) because of this instruction of Paul in Second Thessalonians 2; but many antichrists will come as precursors to this abominable human being who will incorporate in himself all that is against God, finally declaring himself to be a god.

27 See footnotes 11 and 19 for a definition of *lawlessness*.

man of lawlessness will exalt himself above all that is like God, and will falsely call himself “God.”

Already we can hear rumblings as the earth shifts toward increasing lawlessness. Jesus said that the condition of the world at His coming would be as it was in the days of Noah. Lawlessness was pervasive then, and so it will be before His return. (See Matthew 24:36-38.)

I realize this sounds like doom and gloom, but I am merely confirming the condition of the world without God. My confirmation is not meant to point fingers at God’s mighty and glorious Church; just before the Lord’s appearing, as the world descends into darkness, the true Church will become more and more like the Master!

We are moving closer to these events, but we must understand much more about the end-time condition of the Church.

Two End-Time Revivals

A revival of lawlessness is spreading, sparked by the deceiving of many into rejecting God’s commandments and rules. The lawlessness crusade teaches that holiness and godliness have nothing to do with going to heaven. Some promote the idea that you can receive God’s blessing without them.

Many are not aware that this is happening, but it is. Although it is alarming, we ought not to fret because we are not alone. Our mighty Lord Jesus is actively at work to bring His Body into the Ephesians 5:27 reality: a glorious Church without spot or wrinkle!

His Church will be perfected. Now, however, it has been infiltrated by outlandish teachings—but how? Simply put, the devil is sneaky. He does not arrive with horns, pitchfork, and a red cape. No! He transforms himself into an angel of light (see 2 Cor. 11:14) and cleverly disguises his warped doctrines. Satan has perverted Bible truths by taking scriptures out of context. He makes them say something God never said. It is the same technique he used to tempt Jesus (see Luke 4:1-11).

Today, the perversion of God’s true message of grace works the same way. It presents Scripture as saying things the Holy Spirit and God’s vessels never intended. It is

a run-up to the release of the man of lawlessness through the spreading of the mystery of lawlessness. It will cause many to fall away from the faith—but it is only one side of the complete story.

The other side is the end-time release of the greatest revival the world has ever seen—the last great move of God! It will be marked by great holiness, faithfulness, and a divine zeal for the Lord Jesus that will reach unparalleled levels among those committed to God and His Word, even to the death. This zeal will release the miraculous in ways never before seen. The scripture will be fulfilled that says, “zeal for your house has consumed me!” (Ps. 69:9 LEB).

The love of God and for the Lord Jesus and His kingdom will be accompanied by a deep reverence, awe, and honor for Him at levels the Church has not experienced since the book of Acts. This will be the complete opposite of the revival of lawlessness.

The day of dual harvests is illustrated in a parable Jesus taught about a landowner who sows good seed but finds that his enemy has infiltrated the field with bad seed. The parable reveals prophetically what we can expect in the Church at large in the days before the Lord’s coming:

Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn””’

(Matthew 13:24-30 NASB).

Two kinds of seed were growing together. The bad seeds (called *tares*) produced weeds that looked, to the natural eye, like wheat. Only when the crops were fully grown could workers tell them apart.

So it will be just prior to the coming of the Lord. The seed of God's good Word will be taught and preached in His field, the Church. Another deceptive seed will also be sown in the Church, by the enemy. The bad seed will look and smell like the real deal. It will only be discovered when it is too late to prevent its growth.

Make no mistake; the Lord knows where this bad seed comes from. He knows it is in His field, among some who call themselves Christians. He will allow both good seed and bad to grow together. Then He will send forth His angels to gather the good into His barn and throw the weeds into the fire.

Numerous churches and ministers are minimizing God's holy commandments, rejecting moral laws, and accommodating ungodly lifestyles in their congregations. This is bad seed. Many of God's good people are being deceived. It is so insidious that they see only external appearances and are not discerning what is really happening. What they thought was genuine "wheat" might seem religiously and politically correct; but it is anti-God, anti His Christ, and aligned with lawlessness.

Its evil harvest *will* come up, but know this: when harvest time comes the truth will be evident to all! The Lord *will* separate the wheat from the tares; and He will gather only His wheat into His barn.

Lawlessness and the Seduction of God's Servants

Notice what Jesus said concerning the sinful works and teachings that seduced God's servants into practicing immorality and lawlessness in His day:

But you do have this going for you: You hate what the Nicolaitans practice—practices I also hate....But I have a few things against you: You have some people there who follow the teaching of Balaam, who instructed Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so they would eat food sacrificed to idols and commit sexual immorality. In the same way, there are also some among you who follow the teaching of

*the Nicolaitans. Therefore, repent! If not, I will come against you quickly and make war against those people with the sword of my mouth. ...But I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and by her teaching deceives my servants to commit sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent, but she is not willing to repent of her sexual immorality. Look! I am throwing her onto a bed of violent illness, and those who commit adultery with her into terrible suffering, unless they repent of her deeds. Furthermore, I will strike her followers with a deadly disease, and then all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts. I will repay each one of you what your deeds deserve (Revelation 2:6, 14-16; 20-23 NET).*²⁸

Jesus plainly stated His hatred of these doctrines—despite our ideas about love! Jesus applauded those who hated these false teachings. Yet, such hatred of false doctrines leading to sin would be frowned upon in today’s Christianity.²⁹ Clearly, it should be celebrated and admired. In our politically-correct world, too many teach tolerance and acceptance of what is false and evil. Brothers and sisters, we should never tolerate what is false and evil.

Our passage from Revelation 2 is sobering. It is a fearful thing when the Lord says that He will come quickly and make war with the sword of His mouth—against some Christians no less! The only way out for these folks is to repent for placing stumbling blocks before the people and causing them to commit sin.

Did you notice that Jezebel seduced the servants of God into performing immoral acts? Along with the Nicolaitans and another false prophet named Balaam, she was made an example by Jesus of those people and groups committing errors in the Church so serious that Jesus was willing to war because of them!

²⁸ Check other sources for more information on the errors of Balaam, the false prophetess Jezebel, and the Nicolaitans. There are some interesting articles in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Smith’s and Easton’s Bible dictionaries, *Zondervan Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible*, and others. Suffice to say that all of these errors led some servants of God into lawlessness and the commission of sin.

²⁹ Believers are taught to hate some things—yes, to hate even the garment polluted by the flesh (see Jude 1:23). God hates sin and we must do the same. “The fear of the Lord is to hate evil” (see Prov. 8:13a). Holiness can only be perfected through the fear of the Lord. If you do not hate evil, you cannot walk in the fear of the Lord (see 2 Cor. 7:1). Paul taught us to abhor or hate what is evil and cling to what is good! (See Romans 12:9.)

What makes these errors different from others? Why, with so much error abounding did Jesus condemn specific errors in these churches in Asia Minor?

Lower-Level Doctrinal Errors

Most of the doctrinal error in churches today is on a lower level. That is not to say that error should be left uncorrected; but most of it will not prompt the severe and quick judgment described in Revelation 2.

We must accept this fact: churches will never agree on every doctrinal point. No group, denomination, movement, or camp has it all right—not one. Paul taught that we prophesy in part and we know in part.

I only know in part! How about you? Sometimes I would like to know it all but I don't and never will—not on this side of heaven. Nobody knows everything about any subject. Those who think they do are prideful and presumptuous. True humility will keep us on a continuous quest to learn more. As long as we are on this earth in its present state, all of us see through a glass darkly (see 1 Cor. 13:12). We do not have light on everything yet. Until the return of the Lord, there will be differences in the Church. However, foundational points can never be compromised; these include the virgin birth, the sacrifice of Jesus, the resurrection, salvation, repentance, and eternal punishment.

Most doctrinal differences don't rise to this high threshold, and are therefore open to discussion.

There are many erroneous beliefs in Christendom that do not lead one to practice lawlessness. Jesus provided more than spiritual salvation through His redemptive work. His sacrifice also made available physical provisions such as divine protection and healing. Some reject these but they still obey God's moral commands. Most erroneous beliefs won't make you lower your Godly standards. They won't make you steal, commit adultery, or murder!

The consequence of lower lever erroneous beliefs is far different from the errors of Jezebel, Balaam, and the Nicolaitans. It was the seduction of God's servants into sin and lawlessness that drew Jesus to answer quickly and severely.

Turning Grace into a License for Evil

New Testament Scripture warns against those whose doctrinal errors rise to the high level of turning grace into a license for evil:

For certain men have secretly slipped in among you—men who long ago were marked out for the condemnation I am about to describe—ungodly men who have turned the grace of our God into a license for evil and who deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ (Jude 1:4 NET).

If you believe that, under grace, there are no commandments; if you accept a watered-down version of love and faith and believe that Christians are free from condemnation because they are already forgiven of future sins, and can never lose their righteousness (regardless of how much they sin), then you have turned the grace of God into a license for evil.

There is a very big word for this license for evil; it is *licentiousness*. It simply means to give license (or permission) for sexual and other forms of immorality. Licentiousness is exercised by those who are lascivious, lewd, promiscuous, depraved, debauched, lustful, unbridled, shameless, insolent, and wanton.³⁰

That is one ugly list!

The licentious person is a libertine who rejects the moral restraints of God's law or Word. Such people mistake liberty in Christ for freedom to sin.³¹ Licentious people believe and teach that His grace is a sin license, or at least an exemption from any penalty for sin.

We must never take our liberty in Christ as an opportunity to do the works of the flesh Paul enumerated in Galatians 5:19-21. As you read the following passage, notice the definitions (in brackets) that I have added for certain works of the flesh:

*Now **the works of the flesh** [the ways of the world without Christ] are obvious, which are: **adultery** [both spiritual and physical], **sexual immorality** [including homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, fornication, and bestiality]...**lustfulness** [physical or moral impurity], **idolatry** [anything*

³⁰ See BAGD 114d and Thayer's G766.

³¹ See Galatians 5:13 and Romans 13:14.

that becomes a god to a person, including outright idol worship], *sorcery* [including witchcraft, horoscopes, magical arts, séances, the use of drugs to evoke euphoria as in “recreational” drug use, etc.], *hatred* [hostility toward the things of God and whatever is good], *strife* [fighting, wrangling, contention], *jealousies* [the desire to berate and minimize the good in others in order to bolster one’s self by speaking lies and inventing evil], *outbursts of anger* [as in rage with the aspect of violence], *rivalries* [evil competitiveness that seeks the destruction of others], *divisions* [making separate groups or factions through strife and hatred of others], *heresies* [doctrines that cause people to fall away from the true faith in Christ and move into sin and unrighteousness], *envyings* [conceiving and seeking ways to carry out evil against another’s happiness, blessing, or good]...*drunkenness, orgies* [wild partying without restraint, together with drunkenness and immorality], *and things like these* [many more evil things are included though not mentioned]; *of which I forewarn you, even as I also forewarned you, that those who practice* [those who repeatedly and habitually and as part of their behavior act in certain ways] *such things will not* [will never, will not, in the absolute negative] *inherit* [obtain or receive as an inheritance or be a partaker of] *the Kingdom* [rule, reign, or realm], *of God* (Galatians 5:19-21 WEB).³²

Licentious people disregard the rules of God and practice at least some of the things listed in this passage. The unscriptural form of grace proclaimed by some Christians aligns more and more closely with licentiousness. The emphasis is on being free from God’s moral commandments because these were rules under the law and we are not under law. As spiritual as the rationale sounds, when seen in context, it is a baseless perversion of the truth. These strange ideas are moving many to throw all moral restraint to the wind because they promote a command-less gospel without godly rules. We will soon see why this kind of teaching is far from the truth!

³² My comments and definitions are in brackets. I got the definitions by studying each term in Thayer’s, BAGD, and/or Strong’s.

Grace has become a cover-up for unrepentant Christians. They use grace as an excuse for their sinful practices. Grace has become to them a license for evil, rejecting the warning of Jude 1:4. These Christians believe that grace clears them from accountability for their licentious behaviors. They say that grace overlooks their sins and requires no repentance. Many who teach and believe these things have rejected confession of their sins to God.

To say that these ideas are dangerous and devilish is truly an understatement. They are anti-Christ and *pro* the man of lawlessness!

Interestingly, those who proclaim unscriptural forms of grace firmly deny that they are licensing sin. Consider an analogy which sounds like their rationale: Let's assume that you encourage me to avoid trouble with the law by never exceeding 20 mph in a school zone. The idea sounds good to me, so I drive through a few school zones confident that, as long as I obey, I am under grace rather than law. I can rest knowing that I will not be stopped or ticketed.

So far so good. But what if you tell me that I can hit the accelerator and go 100 mph in the school zone? When I ask why it's OK, you explain there will be no consequences for breaking the law. As long as I am under grace, the law won't bother me, no matter how fast I drive.

Whether you intended to or not, you are giving me a license to sin against the law. Such a two-faced message can only confuse people!

Don't try the speeding stunt at home, by the way. It is dangerous and it will be frowned upon by the authorities and by angry parents. The point is that regardless of what "strange grace" communicators think, they have turned grace into a license for evil by removing obedience to the moral law of God. For them, righteous living and godliness are not part of the grace message. Anything other than their brand of believing is relegated to works of the law and works-mindedness.

Understanding license is important. If you have a driver's license you remember the day you first got it. I was exhilarated when I got mine. Mom and Dad didn't have to drive me around anymore. I had sweet freedom!

But I did not yet understand what my license meant. When Dad gave me a car, I took off speeding like a maniac. Soon, I saw flashing lights and heard a siren behind me. A police officer pulled me over, gave me a citation, and reprimanded me harshly for being irresponsible and reckless. (It *was* reckless to go 60 mph in a 25 mph zone!)

I found out that day that having a driver's license did not give me freedom to break the law. It was not a license to do evil or to do as I pleased. The license gave me the right to drive according to Florida's laws, and I had to follow those laws to stay in the good graces of the authorities. Responsibilities and requirements were attached to my driving privileges. If I broke the law or failed to meet its requirements, I would be in trouble.

Our spiritual grace-salvation "driver's license" in the kingdom of God is not a license to break His moral laws and skip His rules! God's grace does not grant us the freedom to sin, but the freedom and desire to obey Him in everything. His grace cannot be turned into a license for evil! Grace does not mean, "I can commit whatever sin I choose, and get away with it." That is a perversion of grace that denies our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. The truths taught in Jude 1:4 are as valid today as they were two thousand years ago.

What True Grace Is Not

As we have seen, true grace as taught in the Scripture is not a license to sin. Scriptural grace must be connected with holiness, biblical morality, God's holy commandments, and godliness. If it is not, it becomes a corrupt message of grace, which is in reality a precursor to licentiousness and lawlessness.

Am I making this up? Let's see what the Bible says about grace and how it will instruct you:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age... (Titus 2:11, 12 NASB).

True grace properly taught will move the believer to: deny ungodliness and worldly lusts (desires); live soberly or self-controlled; and walk in a righteous and godly manner. That is the complete opposite of being law-less!

Therefore, dear friends, since you know this in advance, be on your guard, so that you are not led away by the error of lawless [“unprincipled,” in the NASB] people and fall from your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen (2 Peter 3:17-18 HCSB).

This portion of Scripture is explosive! Again, it cuts through all the wrong notions of grace many are teaching today. What error is Peter writing about? It is the error of the lawless or the “unprincipled,” as the *New American Standard Bible* translates it. The Greek word for lawless or unprincipled³³ refers to those who break through the restraints of law and gratify their lusts.

The error of lawlessness keeps believers from growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and causes them to fall from steadfastness,³⁴ stunting their overall spiritual growth. This is not my idea; I am quoting the apostle Peter. For those who remove the boundaries of scriptural morality by insisting we are under no commandments or rules, the growth process of grace ends. They instead diminish in grace more and more the further they go into lawlessness.

Grace and knowledge are intimately connected to being scripturally principled and subject to moral rules and commandments (*i.e.*, not lawless). The same Greek word for “lawless” or “unprincipled” in Second Peter 3:17 is used in Second Peter 2:7. Consider its context:

And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, condemned them to destruction, having made them an example to those who would live ungodly; and delivered righteous Lot, who was very distressed by the lustful life of the wicked [“unprincipled” in NASB]³⁵ (for that righteous man dwelling among them, was tormented in his righteous soul from day

³³ In the Greek, *athesmos*—Thayer’s and Strong’s G113. BAGD 21a says that it means “lawless and unprincipled”; the opposite is *dikaios* or righteous (just and upright).

³⁴ Synonyms for this word are: *firmness, faithfulness, commitment, loyalty, and dedication.*

³⁵ Lawless people—*athesmos* again. See footnote 34.

to day with seeing and hearing lawless deeds [works, acts, evil things done]... (2 Peter 2:6-8).

According to this blunt example, ungodly living is without excuse and puts you in very bad company. Being turned to ashes and condemned to destruction is a massive warning from the Lord!

Are we heeding it?

The unprincipled and those who practice lawlessness are compared to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah who lived without moral restraint, godly commandments, or any rules. Sodom and Gomorrah are iconic examples of licentiousness. The people in those cities gave everybody license to sin. That is why God destroyed the cities and everyone in them.

We must take God's warnings and examples seriously by never forgetting or minimizing the consequences of giving license to evil!

The True Grace of God

So far we know that God's true grace is not a license to practice sin and evil. It is not a Christian "escape clause" from responsibility or accountability. It is not a "get out of jail free" card that allows us to practice evil without penalty.

If it is *not* all these things, what *is* grace?

God's mighty grace is all the benefit, provision, and blessing provided through the abundant and awesome sacrifice of Jesus.³⁶ Grace refers to God's gifts to you and me—Jesus being the greatest gift of all. John 3:16 is probably the best grace (also, *favor*) verse in the Bible. God gave us Jesus to pay the price for our redemption so we would not perish but have eternal life.

Grace is the same word in Greek translated as the *favor* of God. God's grace-favor is all over the Bible; it is not a New Testament phenomenon exclusive to Christians. Noah found grace or favor before God (see Gen. 6:8) and was saved along with his family from the destruction of the Flood. It is the first time the word *grace* or *favor* appears in the

36 See Romans 3:24; 5:17; First Corinthians 1:4; Second Corinthians 8:9; Ephesians 1:7; Second Thessalonians 2:16; Second Timothy 1:9; and Hebrews 2:9.

Bible. The Hebrew word shows up sixty-nine times in the Old Testament,³⁷ with good reason—all of God’s covenants and covenant provisions are the result of His grace or favor.

Understanding grace is important. One prominent key concerning its manifestation in the Christian life is the need to *believe*. Faith is capable of receiving everything God has provided by His marvelous grace. This faith opens the access to His grace. Many of us misunderstand faith’s workings and would benefit from an adjustment to our definition of *faith*.³⁸ We will define it soon; for now we need to establish the role of faith in accessing grace.

There is another key to grace, found in Ephesians 6:24: “Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity” (NKJV). Grace is manifested for those who love the Lord Jesus genuinely and unrelentingly.

A third key to walking in the grace of God is humility. We humble ourselves before God with our repentance, confession of our sins, submission to His will, and by receiving His correction and instruction (see James 4:1-10; 1 Pet. 5:5-7). The proud get God’s resistance and opposition, but the humble get greater grace. They grow in it and have it multiplied to them (see 2 Pet. 1:2; 3:18).

Going Deeper

In preparation for what we will discuss next in this book, a further word is in order: Hebrews 1:9 states that Jesus was anointed above His fellows. We know Jesus carried the divine presence of His Father. Luke 4:18 says the Holy Spirit was upon Jesus *because* the Spirit of the Lord had anointed Him. In other words, the anointing is an important key to the holy presence of God being manifested.

This is relevant to our study because we want to carry the divine presence and have a relationship-fellowship with the Lord that far exceeds what we have now. We desire a deeper walk with Him and a greater degree of His holy presence in our lives. I know I want it to the greatest degree possible on this side of heaven!

³⁷ In the Hebrew, *chen*—Strong’s H2580 and BDB 333b; HALOT—see the entry under חַן.

³⁸ See Romans 5:2 and First Timothy 1:14.

Most people think Jesus carried the divine presence so powerfully because He was the special and unique Son of the living God (which He was). In Luke 4:18 and Acts 10:38 we discover that God and His Spirit anointed Jesus, but not because He was God manifested in the flesh.

Jesus came to Earth as a man, not as the second person of the Godhead. Philippians 2:7-8 in *The Amplified Bible* reveals that when Jesus came to Earth He stripped Himself of His divine privileges and powers. As a man, Jesus needed the special anointing of the Holy Spirit to carry out His mission and to be a vessel for the holy presence of God.

If we view Jesus in the Gospels only as a divine being sent from the Father (and do not recognize that He gave that up to live as a human among us), we cannot see Him as our example. If He was among us as a man anointed to carry the divine presence, and if as a man He overcame temptation and the devil without yielding to sin, then He can be the example to which we aspire.

Jesus was God manifested in the flesh, but He limited Himself to ministering with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. He was a carrier of that anointing-presence because He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. Scripture says of Him: “You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; this is why God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of joy rather than Your companions” (Heb. 1:9 HCSB).

Jesus understood the dangers of lawlessness, and hated it. Now you and I do, too. Lawlessness is 100 percent against God and His Son. I want to be 100 percent *for* God and His Son. I am against everything He is against, but I also want to be *for* something greater. So I am for whatever He is for.

Jesus was in love with righteousness—with being and doing what was right according to His Father’s will and commandments. Jesus was sold out, obeying to the max everything the Father asked of Him. What a powerful picture of true righteousness He is! He is our eternal example of how to step into higher realms of God and His holy presence.

No one but Jesus has reached the fullest possible place in God. God is eternal and His presence is unfathomable. Regardless of how “deep” we think we are in God, we can always go deeper.

After almost forty years of seeking God and experiencing profound places in Him, I have barely scratched the surface. God is deeper and wider than my wildest dreams, and He wants to share with me (and you) these places in Him!

Jesus will take you as deep as you make yourself available to go. Availability and willingness are paramount; He will not take you where you *don't* choose to go. There are some exceptions, and God can do as He pleases in the end; but in a general sense, you must decide your boundaries. More profound places in God are reserved for the obedient—those who walk in holiness and are sold out to God. Those who practice lawlessness will never get there. They will reach only one bottomless place, and it isn't heaven!

In Summary...

As we go forward, bear in mind two major points learned in this chapter and the previous ones:

- Relationship-fellowship is dependent upon our faithfulness and loyalty to the Lord. It is not sufficient to say, “I love You, Jesus,” if we then reject God's rules, laws, and commandments.
- Lawlessness is rejection and rebellion against God's commandments; righteousness embraces God's Word and obeys it.

Stay with me in this study and light will come from God's Word and by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. We will see in coming chapters that living according to God's holy and righteous commandments is not legalism, but true freedom in Christ.

Does that sound like a contradiction in terms to you? It is not, and we will see why. We will also answer the following questions:

- What do His commandments mean for those under grace?
- Are God's commandments relevant today?

- Are there any Christian commandments?
- Does grace teach me to avoid rules and commandments in order to stay out of bondage to the law?
- Why are the answers to these questions so important for my relationship with God?

We have rich ground to cover, so let's go!

The Revival of God's Commandments

For the Church to be an example in our times, we need a revival of God's holy commandments. When we live according to God's Word with His presence abiding in our lives, we powerfully affect people wherever we go! But if we live lawlessly and call ourselves Christians, we will not testify of Jesus to anyone.

As we choose to live for Christ, well-known commandments speak to us. For example, Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment—to love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another" (John 13:34 NET). Love by itself was not the new commandment because it was taught in Leviticus 19:18 and other places in the Old Covenant. Jesus' emphasis on loving one another *as He loved us* was the new dimension of the love commandment He taught! The example of the Master was to become our model at the highest level, but this "new commandment" was not "the only commandment." Yet, some teach that it is. They claim the love commandment replaces all others for believers who are under grace.

This idea ignores what Paul and other writers taught about living holy and pleasing to God, as we will see. Remember that even Jesus commissioned His followers to guide new believers by "teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you..." (Matt. 28:20a).

Jesus did not say, "Teach them the one thing I taught you." He did not even insinuate that His only commandment was love. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus summarized the commandments of God for the scribes who asked which commandment was the greatest:

Jesus answered, "‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind [Deut. 6:5].’ This is the first and most important [greatest] command. And the second command is like the first: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself [Lev. 19:18].’ All the law and the writings of the prophets...depend [are based; hang] on these two commands" (Matthew 22:37-40 EXB; see also verses 35-36).

The summary of all the law and the prophets in the greatest commandment is based on Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18, as *The Expanded Bible* notes. Jesus did not say that these two commandments made all others trivial or obsolete. He did not delete or replace any laws previously given; He simply summarized them.

Notice what the apostle John wrote: “This is what God commands [his command]: that we believe in [the name of] his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded” (1 John 3:23 EXB).

This verse is interpreted in some circles to mean that God’s only commandments to the Church are *to believe* and *to love*. But remember what we just read in Matthew 28:20 where Jesus mentioned certain commandments He gave to His disciples. Jesus spoke truthfully; therefore First John 3:23 cannot be reinterpreted to exclude all other commandments.

I believe John did what Jesus did: he offered a summary of the commandments. He did not uproot or disavow every other moral law of God. And if, by any stretch of the imagination, faith and love *were* the only two requirements for the Church, we had better study *faith* and *love* in some depth. In any case, we need to understand them better and be prepared for a radical change in our thinking when we do.

Generally, faith and love are viewed through the lens of a Westernized theology that dismisses the context of ancient Middle Eastern setting and language. This has caused generations of Christians to superficially define the terms, forgetting that neither faith nor love can be separated from faithfulness and loyalty to God. Both are covenant terms and are subject to covenant relationship. When we correctly understand them, new and astounding possibilities of relationship-fellowship with God are revealed.

These possibilities must be explored if we are to understand the breadth of God’s intent concerning His commandments. Before we go forward, let’s establish three important points and then read where the apostle Paul confirms them:

- Love as a commandment (as stated in John 13:34 and First John 3:23), does not annul or remove the moral commands of God.

- Those who keep the royal law of love fulfill *all* the moral commands without breaking them, doing away with them, or making them obsolete (see James 2:8-13).
- God’s commandments provide a detailed description of love; they reveal the meaning of love’s many aspects.

The following passage from Paul’s writings supports the three points just mentioned and provides an overview of godly conduct that bridges the Old and New Covenants:

*For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is **summed up** in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the **fulfillment** of the law. Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts (Romans 13:9-14 NASB).*

Notice the terms *summed up* and *fulfillment*. Let’s begin by defining *summed up*:

1. To *sum up* means to condense into a summary.³⁹ The commandments are condensed into a summary by love. If the commandments are tallied, love is their sum total. The tally of the commandments spells out *love*.
2. Love fulfills the moral commandments, not because it excludes them, but because it includes all of them. Love does not supplant or replace the

³⁹ In the Greek, *anakephalaionai*. See Strong’s G346, Thayer’s 38d, and BAGD 58d. The points I make are based on the definitions in these dictionaries of *sum up* and the scriptural references given.

commandments; it sums them up. All moral commandments are contained within the love commandment.

3. The commandments of God are descriptors of how love acts, speaks, and lives.

The apostle John taught that all the commandments are contained within the love commandment; but many have paid no attention to his point or have attempted to water it down. Some have tried to make every reference to “commandments” in his epistles a reference to “love”; but that is adding one’s own theological ideas to what the apostle taught.

John’s intent is clear: “*This is love, that we walk according to His commandments*” (2 John 1:6a NASB). There is no way to interpret “His commandments” as a reference to the love commandment. John is simply explaining what he means by *love*. His definition should settle the matter. If we are interested in love, then we must walk according to His commandments! If we ignore them, we are deficient in the practice of the love of God.

John presents the love walk according to God’s commandments as a kind of litmus test identifying Christ’s own:

This is how we know that we love God’s children when we love God and obey His commands. For this is what love for God is: to keep His commands. Now His commands are not a burden (1 John 5:2-3 HCSB).

The connection between love and God’s commandments is clear, yet it is the complete opposite of what some modern teachers proclaim. Should we believe them or God’s Word? The answer seems obvious. Those who do not acknowledge the passages we have just read are ignorant of what love really is. The more they preach and teach a command-less gospel, the further they drift from the God who *is* love.

How can I say this? Well, we just read in Romans 13:9-11 that all the moral commandments are summed up in love. If God is love (and He is!), rejecting His commandments means rejecting love Himself! (See First John 4:8.)

Knowing Him and Doing His Word

There is no avoiding God’s commands. Obedience is vital, according to John:

We are sure that we know Christ if we obey his commandments. The person who says, "I know him," but doesn't obey his commandments is a liar. The truth isn't in that person (1 John 2:3-4 GW).

Many have assumed that statements like "We know Christ" or "I know Him" refer to mental awareness or some form of spiritual revelation. John says we are sure that we know Christ if we obey His commandments.

Hebrew Scripture never separates our knowing God intellectually or spiritually from our obeying Him.⁴⁰ Knowing God meant doing His will, morally and ethically. Simply collecting information about God or having "revelation knowledge" of Him is not the same as knowing God. Knowledge that is revealed but not acted upon amounts to little more than a mental exercise of questionable value.

Even meditating⁴¹ in the Word is useless unless it leads to moral action. The reason for meditating in the Word "day and night" is "so you can carefully obey what is written in it" (Josh. 1:8 NET). Obeying must follow meditating.

John's idea of knowing God is unpopular in some Christian circles. Nevertheless, John taught his Greek-speaking audience this concept from a scripturally sound Hebrew context. If we will embrace John's writings as he intended and understood them, they will transform our understanding of what it means "to know" God and our Lord Jesus.⁴²

An Argument against Keeping the Commandments

Being revealed that you are a letter of Christ, served by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tablets of stone, but in tablets that are hearts of flesh. Such confidence we have through Christ toward God; not that we are sufficient of ourselves, to account

40 In Hebrew "the verb (יָדָע) yadah 'to know' includes a mental awareness of who God is and a consequential submission to His lordship. To know him is to obey Him." (Lumina NET, *Bible.org*, Note 16 for Prov. 3:6, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Proverbs+3>, accessed September 29, 2014). Another Hebrew word *da'at* is also translated *knowledge* in Scripture. *Da'at* is not referring to a mental knowledge alone, but to knowledge that is experienced. NET version translates it "moral knowledge." (Lumina NET, *Bible.org*, Note 40 for Proverbs 1:7, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Proverbs+1>; Note 18 for Proverbs 2:5, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Proverbs+2>, accessed September 29, 2014). See also BDB 394a.

41 Literally, "reciting it quietly," also meaning: "reading it in undertones." See HALOT 1:237.

42 "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32 NASB) is a good example. To know the truth is to obey it. In John 7:17, Jesus taught that to do God's will is to know His teaching. To know God is to keep His Word in John 8:55. There are different nuances in the application of the word, but when referring to knowing God or having knowledge of the Lord Jesus, this is the foundation. In other words, you cannot separate knowing Him from obeying Him.

anything as from ourselves; but our sufficiency is from God; who also made us sufficient as servants of a New Covenant; not of the letter, but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the service of death, written engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly on the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which was passing away: won't service of the Spirit be with much more glory? For if the service of condemnation has glory, the service of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For truly that which has been made glorious has not been made glorious in this respect, by reason of the glory that surpasses. For if that which passes away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory (2 Corinthians 3:3-11).

The argument of those that oppose keeping the commandments under grace goes like this: “The tablets of the commandments were a ministry of death and condemnation. We are free from all condemnation (see Rom. 8:1); therefore, we are free from the Ten Commandments.”

The argument sounds good at first, but when you examine it closely you realize it is a fragmentary one that does terrible injustice to the text. That being said, we must acknowledge one thing: People who broke God's commandments (especially any of the Ten Commandments) *were* quickly condemned to death. This *was* a ministry of condemnation and death in that respect, and punishment *was* carried out without mercy.

But considering these facts alone provides an out-of-focus view leading to false assumptions. Read verse 3 (emphasized in bold letters) again. The believer in Christ Jesus is a letter of Christ written not with ink or on stone tablets, but with the Spirit of the living God. The tablets mentioned are the stone slabs Moses brought down from Sinai. On them, God had engraved the Ten Commandments with His own finger (see Exod. 20).

According to our text in Second Corinthians 3, the commandments once written on stone tablets are now written on our hearts. What was for Israel a ministry (service) of death and condemnation is now the ministry of righteousness and the service of the Holy Spirit.

Under the New Covenant all the commands are summed up in *love*, which is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 5:5). We receive the free gift of righteousness with a divine impartation—the writing on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. I am convinced from the scriptures I have referenced that righteousness is directly connected to this divine impartation (see Rom. 5:5, 17). The commandments are His righteousness put in us when we receive Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Take time to ponder this, and let the truth penetrate your heart and mind.

The deposit or free gift of grace reads like the Ten Commandments written on stone.⁴³ God did us the great favor (grace) of writing them into our spirits when the Holy Spirit regenerated us.⁴⁴ The love shed abroad in our hearts and the righteousness He accounted to us means that God's commandments are engraved in our spirits (see Rom. 4:22-25).

Let me say it this way: Love and righteousness quickened in the human spirit are the sum total of the moral commandments of God. As believers we each have a personal Torah⁴⁵ scroll written there. It contains the positive commands and the negative ones. Because we are furnished in this way, we have absolutely no excuse for disobeying God. To violate His commandments is to violate one's own conscience and the love of God in one's heart!

Under grace, love and righteousness in our hearts do not require less responsibility and accountability than under the Law of Moses,⁴⁶ but more—much more!

43 The exception being the Sabbath, which was a commandment for the nation of Israel, and not for all the people of the earth. Additionally, more than the Ten Commandments were written in our hearts. All His holy commandments were written into our spirit in the new birth.

44 See Titus 3:5. The apostle Paul states that we were “created in righteousness and holiness of truth” (Eph. 4:24 NASB) The truth is God's Word-commandments (see John 17:17; 8:31, 32). Peter states that we were born again by an incorruptible seed, the Word (commandments) of God that “lives and abides forever” (1 Pet. 1:23; see also vs. 24-25). God's Word-commandments are truth, life, and light to us (see John 1:1-4; 4:14, 23-24, 36; 6:63; 1 John 1:1-2; Ps. 119:105; John 1:1-4, 14; Prov. 4:20-22; Deut. 32:46-47; and many other verses). This is the life of God in us, the very nature of the Father deposited in us in love. The Word is both the commandments of God and His Son Jesus. Jesus and the Word are not separate entities but one and the same. The written Word, which includes the Word-commandments, is a revelation of the living Word. Doing His commandments from a heart of love for God and the Lord Jesus keeps us in Him who is love (see 1 John 2:3-5).

45 If we are to be more accurate, we would have to say that we have the Spirit's writing in our hearts of the applicable commandments of God found in *Torah* (first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures), *Nevi'im* (prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (writings). This is the compendium of Scripture in Hebrew thought, also called the TANACH for short.

46 The Greek word *nomos* (law) in Paul's writings was used in at least four different ways according to J. A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Anchor Yale Bible, vol. 33; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 131-135; 305-306: (1) in the figurative sense of a principle; (2) in the generic sense of a law; (3) referring to the Old Testament or some part of it; and also as (4) a general reference to the Law of Moses. The NET Bible makes

The Scriptural Argument

Is this argument a fanciful interpretation I invented by twisting a few verses, or do other New Testament scriptures teach this? We will let Scripture decide.

Hebrews chapter 8 specifically refers to the Temple sacrifices and its priesthood as being made obsolete because of the sacrifice of Jesus. Please read the whole chapter; it shows that God did something better for us under the New Covenant—and thank God that He did!

But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, by so much as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which on better promises has been given as Law.⁴⁷ For if that first covenant⁴⁸ had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. For finding fault with them, he said, “Behold, the days come,” says the LORD, “that I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt;⁴⁹ for they did not continue in my covenant, and I disregarded them,” says the LORD. “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days,” says the LORD, “I will put my laws into their mind, and I

reference to this in a footnote for Romans 2:12, the first mention of the word law in that epistle. This fourfold use of law in Paul’s epistles is a problem for many because they tend to place every mention of law under the heading of the law of Moses. That is a big mistake in interpretation. My reference in this particular case is to the Law of Moses in a general sense. I use the terms ceremonial and moral laws because Paul saw a clear difference between laws meant only for Israel (temple worship, Levitical priesthood, circumcision, dietary laws, feast and festivals, blood sacrifices) and those that had moral implications for all humanity. I trust our study will effectively point out the differences.

47 Some translations have the word *established* or similar in the place of “given as law.” The Greek word is *nomotheteo* (G3549) and means to give laws, to impose laws, to receive laws. It comes from *nomothetes* (G3550) which means legislator or lawgiver. See also the WEB for a translation like the HCSB translates *nomotheteo* as “legally enacted.” *Nomotheteo* is translated as *received the law* in Hebrews 7:11. The better covenant (New Covenant), and the better promises were given as *law*! See Strong’s G3549; Thayer 427c; and BAGD 541d.

48 Many translations add the word *covenant* here, but it is not found in the Greek text. The first that was made obsolete was the Temple, priesthood, sacrifices, and all associated with it. The covenant of Abraham was never rescinded. God made it a better covenant with better promises for those who come through Jesus to the Father.

49 It is extremely important to distinguish between the Abrahamic covenant and this covenant of priesthood, Temple (Tabernacle), and sacrifices that was made after the children of Israel left Egypt. As far as Israel and the Gentile world was concerned, that covenant was to serve until the coming of the perfect sacrifice in Messiah Jesus and His inauguration as the Apostle and High Priest of a better covenant established on better promises. Hebrews 8 is not, and never was, a reference to the covenant God made with Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant cannot be annulled or we would have no inheritance in Christ as Abraham’s seed; but we have everything they had, plus all the better things God has added through Jesus (see Gal. 3:14, 29; Heb. 8:6). This means there is continuity and not replacement as taught by heretical replacement theologians.

*will also write them on their heart. I will be their God, and they will be my people*⁵⁰ (Hebrews 8:6-10).

Just as the finger of God wrote on the tablets at Sinai, He writes His law in our hearts the moment we receive Jesus as Lord. Hebrews 10:16 also refers to this mighty truth.

Let me repeat another truth: to disobey or rebel against His laws is violation of our inner self in Christ, *because* we carry in our spirits a record of what is right and wrong. Love is the tally (total, account) of all His moral commandments, which in turn describe the very character and nature of God, who is love. We are oblivious to who God and the Lord Jesus are, and what real love is, unless we obey His commandments. Acting in obedience to His commandments is acting in love!

Once God's commands are written in our hearts, they must still change us. This is the renewing of the mind that transforms us and causes us to act according to His will (see Rom. 12:1-2). The renewing of the mind is not limited to thinking right but also *doing right* according to the will of God. When we submit to this mind-renewal process, we are changed supernaturally, away from conformity to the world's ways and into the image of the One who wrote His laws within us.

Our earlier passage from Second Corinthians 3 continues with this transformation and mentions our "unveiled faces." After Moses gave the commandments, and when he came from God's presence, he veiled his face (see Exod. 34:29-35). This represented the veiling of the heart of Israel to the glory of God and His commandments. That veil is removed for those who are in Christ, because the finger of God has written His laws in our hearts. (See Second Corinthians 3:13-16.)

That is true liberty!

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory,

50 See Ezekiel 11:19-20; 37:26-27; and especially Jeremiah 31:31-33. The writer of Hebrews refers to this truth again in 10:16. This is what the New Covenant does in us when we receive the Lordship of Jesus. His laws are written in our hearts and then they are put into our minds. The laws of God put into our minds refers to the renewing of the mind as in Romans 12:1-2.

which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:17-18 HCSB).

As we live in and act on His Word (His righteous commandments), we see the Lord's glory as in a mirror, and the divine work of transformation proceeds. James⁵¹ also taught about this liberty and about the mirror of God's Word:

But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for once he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does (James 1:22-25 NASB).

God's moral commandments are His law of liberty, reflecting to us His divine character, identity, and nature. They transform us as we practice them. Glory to God!

Notice that the terms *Word of God* and *His commandments* are used interchangeably in this book. I do this because the apostle John did the same in First John 2:3-5. Keeping His commandments is keeping His Word. It is impossible for a doer of God's Word to ignore His holy commandments. Those who claim to know the Lord, but refuse His commandments, are liars, and the truth is not in them.

Faith and Believing Defined

In the late 1980s and early 1990s I made a discovery concerning the words *faith* and *believe* in the New Testament that has marked my life. There I was, a "faith man" who preached the "Word of faith" since 1975, saw outstanding results, and yet had a diluted idea of the definitions of these fundamental terms. The good news is that I didn't have to know everything about faith in order to trust God for miraculous results, just like I don't have to know how a jet aircraft works in order to board one and fly! I got on the "jet" of

⁵¹ Read the context in James 1:19-27.

God's Word and faith long before I knew much about it. So can you; but when the Lord tells you that it's time to come up in your understanding and thinking, do not shrink from it.

God is wonderfully merciful toward our ignorance! I know this, because He certainly put up with my deficient ideas and still used me powerfully. Yet I was not satisfied with my relationship-fellowship with the Lord. Even with all the success in ministry, I was often miserable and knew I was missing out on things God wanted me to grasp.

All of that began to change as I studied the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. I was on a quest for more of God and wanted to know His Word in a deeper way. However, I did not expect my entire life to be turned inside out, as it surely was!

It took me years to understand that what I was learning from the Greek and Hebrew was not changing my faith, but adding to it. I lacked the wisdom or understanding to glimpse what God was doing in my life and ministry. He wanted to bring me up higher in Him, but I didn't get it. Thank God, I am finally getting a clue!

Like many in the circles I frequented, faith and believing were seen from the New Testament Greek perspective. My definition of *faith* was confined to the conviction of truth, the application of my Christian beliefs, speaking and agreeing with the Word, and being fully persuaded of God's promises. I taught about acting on the Word (the idea of corresponding action), but it was essentially an add-on to faith and was *outside* of believing in the heart. Corresponding action was not an act of worship, but a means of receiving the manifestation of God's promises.

Don't misunderstand me; I am not rejecting these important parts of faith and believing. Nor am I rejecting the Greek definitions, as my footnotes should prove. The point is that although these things are important, they define faith only in part.

Like many other Christian teachers, I attempted to separate *believing* the Word from *doing* it. I saw faith as belief standing alone without connection to faithfulness and loyalty to God's moral law or commandments. To me, they were separate subjects. I threw around the phrase "Let's believe God" without understanding what the words *faith* and *believe* meant to a Middle Eastern Jew like the apostle Paul.

The Greek word for faith is *pistis*. It is commonly defined as belief, assurance, conviction of truth, but rarely is it connected to faithfulness and loyalty to God. The Greek makes a slight connection, but it is almost as an afterthought. It is not its primary meaning in Greek. The root word for *pistis* is *peitho*,⁵² which sometimes means to obey, yield to, listen to, comply with, and to trust. In Christian teaching these definitions are infrequently connected to faith and believing. Many commentaries and Bible dictionaries focus on the usual ideas, including assurance, persuasion, and conviction of truth.

The Hebrew words for *faith* and *believe* differ radically from the Greek, and because Paul refers to some Hebrew Scriptures containing these words, we must understand the difference in terms of interpretation. A quick look at some examples will explain what I mean.

Do you remember Genesis 15:6 says that Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness?⁵³ This verse is quoted by Paul in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6. When seen in the Greek text, it is evident that Paul used the same words found in the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament known as the *Septuagint*. This tells us that Paul was familiar with the Septuagint.

Scholars agree on this point, but there is another point not readily accepted by some. The Hebrew language of the Old Testament stands behind the Septuagint Greek.⁵⁴ Yet the Hebrew is often ignored in interpreting and defining New Testament words.⁵⁵ This is

52 *Peitho*—Thayer's and Strong's G3982. *Peitho* is the root of *pistis* (G4102) and *pisteuo* (G4100), faith and believe.

53 Quoted in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6, and also in James 2:23. See *Keil and Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament*, First Book of Moses, 212-213 for more on Genesis 15:6.

54 This is a simplified explanation and a superficial treatment of a complex subject, but it will suffice for our present study. The Septuagint, also known as LXX, is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture completed in 300-270 BC. In the LXX, Hebrew words were given Greek equivalents. It was the standard Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament used among Greek-speaking Jews and later among Greek-speaking Christians. Paul quotes the Septuagint Greek, though not necessarily verbatim. See *Hatch and Redpath Concordance to the Septuagint*, pgs. 1137-1139, s.v. "faith-believe" (πιστευειν, πιστις, πιστος, etc.) and the equivalent words from the Hebrew.

55 Many fall back on a Greek interpretation of the words faith and believe based on usage by Greek writers and philosophers. This is why, to many, faith and believe is credence, a Christian acknowledgment of Jesus as the revelation of God and not much else. Sometimes the Hebrew definitions are acknowledged, the translation of these words into Greek in the Septuagint is seen, and then the Hebrew original text behind the Greek is ignored in favor of an interpretation in agreement with Greek usage among the heathens! I fundamentally disagree with that approach among some of the more studious. If the original words were Hebrew in the Old Testament, and if the Septuagint was a translation of the Hebrew into Greek, then the most logical source for correct interpretation must be the Hebrew that stands behind it. The Septuagint was a straightforward, literal translation of the Hebrew text. Very literal translations from one language to another can be very deficient and sometimes leave the wrong impression. Often they make no sense at all unless you read the original language version! Anybody that has translated from English to Spanish, and vice versa knows this is true. The differences between Hebrew and Greek are much bigger than between English and Spanish. Generally speaking, in the Septuagint, one Hebrew word was assigned to one Greek word without further interpretation. In order to arrive at the right or full meaning one must go back to the original

a mistake. We should pay close attention to the Septuagint because most Bible quotations in the New Testament use its language. However, we should also examine closely the Hebrew from which the Septuagint text was taken.

For example, the Hebrew word in Genesis 15:6 translated “believed” does not mean “belief.” It means to be established, confirm, trust, stand firm, be faithful (loyal), and be dependable; it also means sure, lasting, reliable, verified, and more.⁵⁶ The ideas of faithfulness, trustworthiness, and loyalty can summarize it.

So how does this help our understanding of the words *faith* and *believe* in the New Testament? It changes everything! It is impossible to believe God and His Word without having lasting and reliable faith, faithfulness, and loyalty. On the one hand *faith* describes our trust in God. On the other, it means He can trust us because *we* are reliable and standing firm.

Abraham was said to be righteous because he believed God. But Abraham did more than passively trust Him. He was faithful to God’s commands, established and firm in them. He trusted in God’s Word and his faithfulness did not quit! Abraham’s conduct reflected this truth: faith and faithfulness cannot be separated from obedience to God’s moral injunctions and holy commandments.⁵⁷

Paul used the words *faith* and *believe* from the perspective of their Hebrew definitions. To think only along the lines of belief, conviction, assurance, or full persuasion dilutes the definitions as Paul understood them from the original Hebrew texts. Notice that he did not redefine the words *faith* and *believe* because we are under

Hebrew. The hundreds of Scripture quotations, inferences, and hints given from the Hebrew bible in the New Testament make Hebrew as important, and dare I say, more important than the Greek for Christian doctrinal interpretation.

⁵⁶ In Hebrew, *heemin*—from the root word *aman*. BDB coded to Strong’s H539. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 4:4299, s.v. “belief.”

⁵⁷ See Romans 1:5 and 16:26 and the phrase *obedience of faith*. Obedience to God and His Word-commandments is inseparable from faith-faithfulness. See this Greek phrase ὑποκοχὴν πιστεως in the *International Critical Commentary: Romans 1-8* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 2004). C.E.B. Cranfield, 1:66-67. Cranfield states that, for Paul, faith in God and obedience to Him are equivalent in the book of Romans, and that the aim of Paul’s preaching was to obtain true obedience from his hearers. Though my statement regarding Abraham’s obedience to God’s commandments may seem injected retroactively from the Law of Moses into the patriarch’s life, it is not; we will prove soon that God’s moral injunctions and commandments have existed from the creation. Abraham was obedient to God’s charge, commandments, statutes, and laws (Gen. 26:5). That is certainly more than he “only believed.” Abraham demonstrated obedience of faith!

grace. Yet some attempt to do so—even though Paul quoted the Old Testament using these very words!⁵⁸

Undeniably, Paul taught the divine authority and inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures. They were the *only* Scriptures in existence!⁵⁹ There was no New Testament yet. Therefore, *faith* and *believe* retained the Hebrew definitions from the scriptures Paul quoted.

Let's look at two more examples quoted by Paul from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scripture (Septuagint) and consider the Hebrew behind them:

1. In Romans 10:16, Paul quoted Isaiah 53:1. The Hebrew word for *believed* in Isaiah 53:1 is the same one used in Genesis 15:6.⁶⁰ Therefore, faithfulness, trustworthiness, and loyalty are integral to it, and the faith mentioned in the next verse (faith that comes by hearing) is not a faith of belief or conviction alone. Paul had in mind a faithful obedience to God. This is the kind of faith those who hear God's Word should receive.

2. In Romans 1:17,⁶¹ Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4. *Faith* is the Hebrew word *emunah*, which comes from the root word *aman*.⁶² The definition includes firmness, steadfastness, and fidelity.⁶³ *Fidelity* is a powerful word that means faithfulness, loyalty, trustworthiness, commitment, and devotion.⁶⁴

We cannot have faith in God (see Mark 11:22) unless these same qualities govern our approach to God and His commandments. Obviously, faith toward God is one of the

58 Of course, the Object of our faith in the New Testament is Jesus and His sacrifice, but that certainly does not change the definitions of these words.

59 See Romans 1:2; 15:4; Second Timothy 3:16.

60 The Lumina NET at *Bible.org* says that *heemin* from the root word *aman* does not mean believe. The verb *aman* means "to confirm, to support in the Qal verbal stem." As a noun, it refers to providing support, and is can be translated as "'pillar, nurse, or guardian, trustee.' In the Niphal stem... 'to be faithful... reliable...dependable...firm...sure.' In the Hiphil '...reliable...dependable,'" etc. (Note 20 for Genesis 15:6, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Genesis+15>, accessed September 29, 2014). To turn around and change the meaning of this word to a Greek (and very heathen) philosophical interpretation of "credence" or Christian "beliefs," as is often done, is to do a huge injustice to the original Hebrew behind the Septuagint's quotations in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6.

61 Also quoted in Galatians 3:11 and Hebrews 10:38. The Greek word used for faith is *pistis*.

62 The Lumina NET at *Bible.org*, Note 15 for Habakkuk 2:4, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Habakkuk+2> (accessed September 29, 2014), says that the traditional translation of *emunah* as faith "nowhere else refers to 'belief' as such." Loyalty, "honesty, integrity, reliability, faithfulness" define *emunah* when used in reference to human conduct and character, as in this verse.

63 BDB states that *emunah* means: firmness, fidelity, steadfastness, and steadiness (H530).

64 HALOT states that *emunah* means: "1. steadfastness, remained motionless (GK §141b, c) Ex 17:12 2. trustworthiness, faithfulness a) of people 1S 26:23 Is 11:5 Ps 119:130 (alt. truth) 2C 19:9; Hos 2:22 Hab 2:4 (1QpHab 7:18- 8:2; Gal 3:11; Rom 1:17)." Believe or belief is not a translation of this Hebrew word. The word means trustworthiness and faithfulness in Habakkuk 2:4, and it should be interpreted the same way in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.

foundational principles of the Church (see Heb. 6:1). We cannot view it in the narrow Greek sense; we need to embrace the complete definitions already mentioned. These definitions join conviction and assurance with faithfulness, commitment, devotion, trustworthiness, and loyalty to God, His Word, and His Commandments.

You can see how a true Bible faith is distorted by a “belief only” theology. According to the apostle Peter, faith *must* be connected to God’s moral commandments. He wrote: “For this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge...” (2 Pet. 1:5 NASB).

Faith must be supplied by moral excellence, and moral excellence must be supplied with knowledge. This refers to our awareness of God and submission to His will. If we really know Him, we will *faithfully* keep His commandments (see 1 John 2:3-4).

Fulfilling the Commandments

Let’s take another look at Romans 13:8-10:

*Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has **fulfilled** the law. For this, “YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET,” and if there is any other commandment, it is **summed up** in this saying, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (NASB).*

Fulfilled in verse 8, indicates the law being brought to completion and fullness. The sense includes the idea that God’s moral laws are kept whole or without breakage. Neither *fulfilled* nor *summed up* (see verse 9) convey any notion of removal, elimination, or deletion of God’s righteous commandments. The purpose of summarizing the love commandment is to ensure that we don’t break any of God’s moral ones. Paul referred here to the Ten Commandments *and* to whatever other commandments there are (that’s a lot more than the “Big Ten”).

When we live in the love of God we keep the commandments of God. If we love Him deeply and profoundly, we zealously desire to please Him. Jesus said: “The person

who has my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me...If anyone loves me, he will obey my word..." (John 14:21a, 23a NET).

Do we love Him or pretend to love Him? If we are intensely truthful about loving the Lord (and I trust that we are), we must do His commandments. Did you notice that, like John, Jesus drew a parallel between obeying the commandments and obeying His Word? Jesus also said: "If you obey my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commandments and remain in his love" (John 15:10 NET).

To remain or abide⁶⁵ in His love is to obey Him, because His commandments are summed up in love. If we fail to obey His commandments, we cannot remain in His love. That is what Jesus said, and He was absolutely right, as always!

What does all this mean for Christians today?

- The sum total of His moral commandments is inseparable from love as it exists under the grace of God in Christ.
- The idea that doing or keeping God's commandments is "under the law" or should be seen as "works of the law" is a perversion of the truth. These phrases have sadly been made to say something completely other than what Paul taught.
- To say that God's commands are irrelevant for Christians under grace is to grotesquely misuse the Scripture.

Paul, a powerful proponent of pure grace, as some like to say, taught in Ephesians 6:1-3 that the first commandment (of the Ten) with a promise attached is to honor your father and mother. If Paul's gospel of grace repudiates all moral commands and if he believed that commandments were "works of the law," why did Paul urge the church at Ephesus to obey even one of them?

Bear in mind that, for Israel, the Ten Commandments were the major moral commandments; but there were many other moral commands and injunctions revealed in Scripture that remain pertinent to modern relationships (in family, marriage, business,

⁶⁵ Abide (*meno* in the Greek) means to stay in, remain, and be established in. See Strong's and Thayer's G3306, TDNT 4:574, 581.

etc.). Moral prohibitions were given against certain sexual unions including adulterous ones and those involving incest, prostitution, and bestiality. Also prohibited were same-sex unions.

God's people were warned against doing the same things godless people do. Not all warnings involved sex; sorcery, witchcraft, the use of horoscopes, and all forms of idolatry were also prohibited.⁶⁶

In his writings, Paul spoke clearly to these moral imperatives. First Corinthians 5 deals with removing incest from the church at Corinth. First Corinthians 7 deals with virginity, marriage, and divorce. First Thessalonians 4:1-12 deals with fornication and adulterous affairs. First Corinthians 8 addresses idolatrous practices. First Corinthians 10 warns us not to commit the acts that brought judgment upon the Israelites. These examples were given to help us avoid such mistakes and to urge us to “flee from idolatry” (1 Cor. 10:14 NASB).

In First Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul provided a list of prohibited activities and a warning about unrighteousness:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor the effeminate,⁶⁷ nor men who practice sexual relations with men,⁶⁸ nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor extortioners, will inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

This wake-up call was tough and unvarnished. But wasn't Paul the preacher of pure grace?

Yes, Paul preached grace. Yet those practicing wicked activities were not told, “Welcome to heaven!” Paul was not a seeker-friendly leader teaching a puny Bible-less “gospel” message. He used all the words deemed politically and religiously incorrect

⁶⁶ Read Leviticus chapters 19 and 20 and Deuteronomy chapters 17 through 22.

⁶⁷ *Effeminate* refers to the passive male in a homosexual relationship, according to Lumina NET, *Bible.org*, Note 5 for First Corinthians 6:9, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/1+Corinthians+6> (accessed September 29, 2014).

⁶⁸ From NHEB, Note for First Corinthians 6:9: “6:9 Lit. ‘man-lier.’ Gk arsenokoites, poss. from LXX Leviticus 18:22 20:13 where God forbids men/males (arsenos) to lie/have sex (koiten) as with a woman. See also Romans 1:26-27. Peshitta Aramaic: la sheykeb um dikra. Murdock ‘nor liers with males’; Lamsa ‘nor men who lie with men.’ See also J. Magiera edition.”

today. Some Christian communicators avoid using these words. God's truth is compromised. Instead of agreeing with the Scripture, their messages are reduced to self-help lessons and psychobabble. (Not all self-help and psychological concepts are bad or in disagreement with the Word.)

Church, it is time to repent!

Paul meant business. He even held a “magic and sorcery” book-burning at Ephesus (see Acts 19:17-20). Do you think they burned those scrolls to heat the neighborhood one cool night? No. Christians were convicted through Paul's teaching and preaching. They realized the books were an abomination to God and they needed to remove them forever from their midst. It was done in the most dramatic way possible—by burning expensive scrolls!

I repeat: it is time to repent!

Paul ministered to those outside any law of God. He went among them and even ate with them. This was unheard of (and heretical) for a Jew. But Paul understood his freedom in Christ. At the same time, he recognized his responsibility to keep the moral commandments, even as a partaker of Christ Jesus. He knew that to minister to the world he could not conform to its evil ways. Paul could live among the Gentiles and evangelize them, yet remain completely faithful to the Lord.

Paul knew who he was *and* knew how to reach the lost:

*To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law; to those who are without law, as without law, **though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ**, so that I might win those who are without law (1 Corinthians 9:20-21 NASB).*

Notice this statement: “though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ.” It is remarkable in light of modern claims that Paul rejected the law for those

under grace. He was not without law, even though verse 20 states that he was not under it.⁶⁹

Was Paul double-minded and self-contradictory? Was his theology schizophrenic? Certainly not. The coming chapters will shed light on the seeming contradiction. For now, suffice to say that Paul emphasized different aspects of law in different places in his writings. The context beginning in First Corinthians 9:20 shows the aspects of law from which Paul was free, aspects that were exclusively directed at the Jews.

Paul's statement of freedom from the law given for Israel through Moses (at Sinai) does not free us from keeping God's moral commandments, however. Paul taught about the parts of the law that were pointless for Christians under grace; but he also revealed those parts that remained the responsibility of all believers in Christ. This is the reason for Paul's statement in verse 21. He wanted the Corinthians to understand that although they were not required to observe aspects of the law meant only for Israel, they were not exempted from God's moral commands.

The revival of lawlessness misses this point entirely. For the revival of God's commandments to come, we must understand this distinction and embrace every form of God's moral guidance. To do this faithfully is to believe and love Him.

⁶⁹ Some translations exclude the parenthetical statement "though I myself am not under the law." (Lumina NET, *Bible.org*, Note 9 for First Corinthians 9:20, <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/1+Corinthians+9>, accessed September 29, 2014). There is, however, good manuscript evidence to support its inclusion. NKJV, WEB, KJV, Young's Literal Translation, and others exclude the statement. NASB, HCSB, EXB, LEB, NET, NIV, and others include it. It may have made it easier to interpret Paul's statements here if this statement was not in the text, but we have to deal with it because it appears to be original. The context clearly reveals (at least to me) Paul's intention concerning the statements on law in verses 20 and 21. He was comparing two different aspects of law, the ceremonial law revealed to Moses at Sinai exclusively for Israel, and the moral law of God that was intended for everybody. See GW translation.

God's Purpose for His Commandments

When I was about twelve years old, we lived on a large property in Carolina, Puerto Rico where a beautiful, colorful fountain lighted up the night. The fountain's cement pool was approximately three feet deep and twenty feet in diameter. Dad assigned me to maintain and clean both the fountain and its pool.

One night, Dad told me to turn off the fountain because the lights were on, but the water had stopped spraying. He said, "Don't do anything else. Just turn off the breakers and leave the fountain alone."

Dad went inside the house and I got a brilliant idea: "I'll get in the water, wade over to the sprayer, and see what's up." What was I thinking? I was no fountain mechanic. My idea was not only dumb; it was dumber.

Nevertheless, I got into the water. Immediately, my legs hurt. Pain shot through my back. My teeth rattled uncontrollably and I screamed for help. The electrical shock was so strong that I fell out of the pond and hit the ground hard. The fall saved my life, but I shook all over and it felt like my hair was on fire. I even smelled smoke!

An apparent short circuit had caused the fountain to malfunction. Unfortunately, I had not considered that possibility soon enough. For hours after the shock, my hurting body forced me to think about it. Later, I found out that Dad suspected a short circuit, though he had not said so. He did, however, tell me what to do and he expressly told me to do *nothing* else.

Was Dad's warning harsh? Was he restricting my freedom and being overbearing by saying "no" to whatever ideas might get me electrocuted? Of course not! He was trying to protect me. He understood that water and electricity are a dangerous combination and that water multiplies electricity's effects. He knew I could be hurt or killed, which I nearly was *due to my disobedience*.

Was God being difficult or harsh in giving us His commandments? No. God is the epitome of loving fatherhood. By giving His commandments He set in motion a divine

plan—a good plan. He told His people to obey His laws diligently because He wanted the best for them (see Deut. 28:1-2). But there were two sides to the coin: there would be blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience.

That is how I read Deuteronomy 28:1-15. How do you read it?

The Why

The New Testament gives powerful reasons for God’s commandments being given. Here are some from the epistle of Paul to Timothy:

Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith (1Timothy 1:5 NKJV).

Some Bible translations render the word *commandment* as “instruction” or “teaching.” Those are fairly loose translations in this context. The Greek word is rendered elsewhere as “command,” “strict order,” and “commandments.”⁷⁰ The word does not refer to teaching or instruction alone, but conveys the delivery of a message within the framework of an order given. This was not Paul’s personal urging for Timothy to follow Paul’s instructions; it was a reference to God’s commandment.

So what *was* God’s purpose in requiring obedience to His commandments? Some believe the requirement came from a cruel, austere God who subjected His beloved Israel to a form of slavery “under the law.” This leads to the similarly flawed idea that believers who are under grace have no reason to live under such harsh and “enslaving” requirements. Another faulty conclusion is that God gave His moral commandments because He knew we could not keep them, and He wanted to condemn us for breaking them. It is a rather bizarre idea, especially in light of verse 5 which reveals God’s real purpose: “love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith” (1 Tim. 1:5).

That does not sound like a cruel and condemning God to me!

Ephesians 6:3 offers another powerful reason for God’s commandments to have been given and obeyed: “that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth”

70 In the Greek, *paraggelia*, from *paragello*—see Bauer’s (BAGD) 613a, Thayer 479d, TDNT- 5:761, 776, Strong’s G3853.

(NKJV). This is a powerful, double-barreled promise. It is equally strong when taken in the negative: if we do not keep His commandments, it will not go well with us, and we will die before we should.”

I’ll take the first promise, thank you very much!

This truth is often repeated in the biblical text. The general idea is: “Do what He tells you and be blessed; but if you rebel and refuse to do what He says then you will be cursed.”⁷¹ God says this, not to be harsh, but because He knows where our disobedience leads: to death, evil, and destruction. He wants us to avoid those terrible consequences. What He wants for us is life, and life more abundantly (see John 10:10). He wants us to live out the fullness of our days (see Ps. 91:16). He desires that we be blessed and not cursed. God wants us to prosper in every way!⁷² He wants us to enjoy the real life only He can give! (See First Timothy 6:17.)

Love is why God gave us His commandments. First Timothy 1:5 is easy to understand. First it reveals that God’s holy commandments empower us to love Him and love people from a *pure* heart. Many verses in the book of Deuteronomy connect the commandments to loving Him, and also reveal His love for us. *Purity* was God’s idea. He wants a holy people; His commandments are the path to a pure life, sanctification, and holiness. Unless His commandments are obeyed, purity is impossible.

Secondly, God gave His commandments so we could act on them and maintain a good conscience toward Him and toward others. This good conscience would be free from guilt and condemnation. It is essential in treating others right. It is also an important factor in answered prayer and a positive precursor to being led by the Holy Spirit into all truth (a subject for another book).

Thirdly, keeping His commandments is proof of sincere faith-faithfulness. The insincere, deceived, and hypocrites refuse to keep His commandments. “Have faith in God” is not to have a “belief” in God. You can believe that God is real and never have

71 Here are a few verses for your consideration: Deuteronomy 28:1-3, 14, 15; 30:1-20. There are others in the New Testament, such as First Peter 3:10-12, which is a quotation from the book of Psalms.

72 See Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:1-3; 3 John 1:2.

faith in Him. Mark 11:22 commands a foundation of faithfulness and loyalty to God, and a trust in Him that will not quit. Faith must rest on this foundation.

Faith-faithfulness is not only something we have and use; faithfulness is intimately connected to our relationship-fellowship with God.

The Goodness and Curse of the Law

Paul, who wrote so powerfully about grace, also wrote about the benefits of God's commandments, as he did in his letter to Timothy:

For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions. But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made [literally, valid] for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious...(1 Timothy 1:6-9 NASB).

Because of how the ending of this passage is stated, and because a comparison is made between two kinds of people, the word *righteous* here cannot be speaking of the credited righteousness brought to the believer in Christ (Rom. 4:22-25 NASB). It instead refers to righteous acts and a way of life that springs from righteousness. The "lawless" and the "rebellious" are those without regard for the commandments of God (laws which Paul says are good). This entire portion of Paul's writings deals with moral commandments and their violation by some.

All of God's law given to Israel was good according to Paul (even the ceremonial aspects while they were in force). First Timothy connects to other statements by Paul praising the commandments of God. In Romans 7:12, Paul wrote: "The law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." In verse 14 he wrote that "the law is spiritual" (NKJV).

Why is it important to know that God's commandments are good? Because some teach that God's law was a curse upon Israel, and that we are redeemed from the curse of

the law. They don't just say the law produced the curse, but that the law itself was a curse!

This is a misunderstanding of Galatians 3:13 which says: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')..." (NKJV). This verse does not say that we were redeemed from the law *because* it was a curse! To preach or believe that is poor interpretation. If God's moral law was itself a curse, then how could Paul say it was holy, just, and good? He could not, because curses are never connected to anything good in the Bible. (Neither are blessings ever connected to anything bad!)

We are redeemed from the curse pronounced by God upon those who violate His precepts and commandments. That curse is recorded in Deuteronomy 28:14-68 and other places. When we come to Jesus, we are legally redeemed from the consequences of breaking God's law. However, our redemption must be received and acted upon by faith.⁷³ It is not automatically lived as a reality.

Another important point is that the curse continues in the earth even after the sacrifice of Jesus. If we reject His redemption through disobedience and ungodly living, we step out of faith-faithfulness and into places where the curse can reach us. Our redemption is provided and made available, but is only manifested in us and around us as we stand on it *by* faith and faithfulness. These give us access (admission, approach) into the great grace of His redemption⁷⁴ and lay hold of the blessing in redemption.

When we first trusted in the mighty sacrifice of Jesus, His blood washed away all our violations of His moral commandments. At that moment, we were made pure and holy before God. Our sins were washed away, never to come up for judgment again! After our spiritual regeneration, we need to *keep* ourselves and *stay* (remain steadfast) in what Jesus did, through obedience to His Word and trust in His sacrifice for us.⁷⁵ We also must

⁷³ See Galatians 3:7-9, 14.

⁷⁴ See Romans 5:2; Galatians 3:14.

⁷⁵ This should not sound strange to us in the light of Colossians 1:21-23, Romans 6:12-23; Hebrews 3:6; 5:9, and many other scriptures.

learn that when we blow it, the way back into God's loving arms and grace is through repentance and confession of our sin to our Advocate in heaven.⁷⁶

Redemption is received by faith-faithfulness and not by osmosis or by grace alone! Grace provided our complete redemption, but faith-faithfulness receives it and causes us to continue in it.⁷⁷ What grace provides, faith-faithfulness appropriates and brings into manifestation in the physical realm. In this case, I am referring to faith as conviction, trust, *and obedience* to His divine instruction and direction. Obeying His Word results in blessing, just as surely as rejecting it lays open the curse.

Aspects of God's Law

It is noteworthy that the word *law* in First Timothy 1:6-9 does not speak of all the Law of Moses, as in the 613 commandments that included all the ceremonial laws. Paul was speaking in this passage about God's moral injunctions.

In his writings overall, Paul addressed the law in different ways. Sometimes he referred to the moral commandments as the law of God. At other times he referred to the ceremonial aspects of the law that were uniquely and specifically for Israel. At still other times, Paul made reference to the law as a principle or a certain part of the Old Testament Scripture.

One very pointed example of Paul referring to the ceremonial laws is in the book of Galatians. Paul specifically addressed those who tried to cram ceremonial Judaism down the throats of Gentile converts in Galatia. Those who "Judaized" these Gentiles insisted that all males in Christ be physically circumcised. They also required male and female converts to keep other ceremonial aspects of law in order to be saved (see Gal. 2). This teaching was wrong and forced the creation of the Jerusalem Council to resolve the matter (see Acts 15).

There is no question that in First Timothy chapter 1, Paul wrote about God's moral injunctions, both positive (see vs. 4) and negative (see vss. 9 and 10), and not any

⁷⁶ See Second Corinthians 12:21; Second Peter 3:9; Second Timothy 2:25; First John 1:7-9; 2:1.

⁷⁷ See Colossians 1:21-23; Romans 5:2; Ephesians 2:8.

ceremonial aspects of law.⁷⁸ This was not the only place where Paul used the word *law* to refer to moral commandments. He used the word this way in Romans 7:6-7, and in Romans chapters 2 and 3. The same can be said for Romans 13:9-11, which we studied earlier.

Another clear example of *law* as the moral commandments alone is found in James 2:6-13. Notice how James referred to the commandments as *the law* and specifically mentioned three commands: “Love your neighbor as yourself,” “Do not commit adultery,” and “Do not commit murder.” Do you see that James clearly defined his intended meaning?

Note, however, that even when Paul spoke about being made free from the general Law of Moses, he was *not* referring to being made free from God’s moral commandments. Our study clearly shows that the moral commands are not subject to deletion, change, or replacement.

The differentiated segments of law must be properly understood for Scripture to be properly interpreted. There is no question that Paul specifically highlighted God’s moral commandments in First Timothy 1 and in Romans chapters 1–3, 7, and 13. This is a big problem for preachers and commentators whose tendency is to always and everywhere see the law as a single, undifferentiated body of commands. They fail to realize that Paul emphasized different aspects of law in different places. This misunderstanding and their desire to distinguish between law and grace lead to interpretations that diminish the great importance of God’s moral code.

There is another fine point; it is actually a major key to getting our thinking in line with God’s Word: we must understand that moral commandments did not originate when Moses received the revelation of God at Mount Sinai. Moral commandments are as eternal as the Word of God is eternal. We will discuss this at length in coming chapters. It is a life-changing and eye-opening Bible revelation that dramatically changes common views of what Paul was referring to when he mentioned the law.

⁷⁸ I call these *vice lists* (as they are commonly known), a part of the negative commandments because there are corresponding “You will not” or “Thou shalt not” commandments that refer to these prohibited activities.

Meanwhile, some additional truths will help us to keep our doctrine and assumptions straight:

1. Romans 14 gave correction to those who required believers to keep ceremonial dietary laws and the Sabbath. These were not to be forced upon Christians.
2. Colossians 2:16-17 specifically mentioned food, drink, festivals (feasts), new moon, and the keeping of the Sabbath. These were ceremonial-type laws required only of Israel; they were not meant for Gentile converts to the Lord Jesus.
3. The entire book of Galatians asserted that Gentiles coming to Christ must not be coerced into circumcision or asked to keep any other laws meant only for Israel (see Gal. 2:14; 4:9-10; 5:2-5).

Remember, as mentioned earlier, that Paul's references in First Timothy chapter 1 (vss. 4, 9, and 10) do not concern laws about Israel's Temple worship, circumcision, feasts, animal blood sacrifices, priesthood, Sabbath days, dietary laws,⁷⁹ or priestly ceremonial purity. First Timothy 1:9-10 is a list of "do not" commandments, as is found in Galatians 5:19-21.⁸⁰

People often refer to these compilations as vice lists. I prefer to call them *negative* commandments because they state behaviors prohibited for believers. We must distinguish them from *positive* commandments such as "Obey your parents," "Love your neighbor as yourself," and others. These do not forbid behaviors but tell us what we *should* do. (Again, First Timothy 1:9-11 tells us what is prohibited to us.⁸¹) Paul frequently discussed both God's positive and negative commands in his writings. However, the subject has been poorly and often erroneously treated in Christian writings,

79 It is vital to see the connection between clean and unclean animals that could be sacrificed to God, and the dietary laws. The Israelites were only allowed to eat the clean or kosher to continually remind them that they were separated to God for holy worship of the one true God with these particular kinds of animals. Keeping a kosher home was never intended for the world, but for Israel alone. Dietary laws were another way of God drawing a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles around them. Though we are not subject to dietary laws, I will not condemn or judge anybody who wants to keep them. The problems begin when people who do keep them and people who don't keep them get into arguments over the issue. The only dietary laws for Christian are found in Acts 15:29. On a separate note, Jesus was against the false prophetess Jezebel because she deceived God's servants into committing sexual immorality (fornication) and eating things sacrificed to idols (see Rev. 2:20). Jesus was in agreement with the prohibitions established at the Jerusalem church council in Acts 15:29.

80 See also Ephesians 4:25-31; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5-6; Romans 13:9; and First Corinthians 6:9-10.

81 The idea of positive and negative commandments is not new. The ancient rabbis recognized this truth. See b. Makkoth 23b where it is recorded that R. Simlai preached that there were 613 precepts communicated to Moses, 365 negative and 248 positive commandments.

commentaries, dictionaries, and in pulpits. It is necessary, therefore, to clarify these truths and promote a correct New Testament perspective.

Why Ceremonial Commandments Are Obsolete for Christians

No Christian is subject to Israel-specific commandments because Jesus is the fulfillment of them (*i.e.*, ceremonial commandments, ordinances, and injunctions). The Lord fulfilled all blood sacrifices with His once-for-all sacrifice as the Lamb of God. (See Hebrews 9:11-15.)

Ceremonial commandments were required for Israel as long as the Temple remained standing. These were never required for those outside of Israel, even when God first gave them. In fact, the outside world was not invited to participate in Temple worship and its blood sacrifices.⁸² These mandates certainly do not apply to any Christian today.

Even for Jews, the AD 70⁸³ destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem made ceremonial commandments obsolete. The vehicle (the Temple) required to carry them out was gone, and the priesthood disappeared with it. Some very resourceful rabbis reinvented the methods by which ceremonial-type commandments were to be kept without a Temple, sacrifices, or priesthood, but these were artificial in nature.⁸⁴ By “artificial” I mean that they reinterpreted God’s commandments, but without their essential elements.

Because faithful adherents of Judaism keep the feasts, festivals, and Sabbaths so differently today, and because there is no temple or Levitical priesthood, I laugh at meaningless discussions about Christians not being “under the Law of Moses.” Such talk shows a lack of understanding of Judaism and of its history since the destruction of the

82 There were requirements for Israel to offer up daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and Sabbath-day sacrifices. Also, each of the feasts was accompanied by blood sacrifices. See Numbers chapters 28 and 29. To this we must add the various sacrifices mentioned in Leviticus chapters 1 through 17.

83 In Wars 6:249-50 Josephus wrote that the destruction happened on the 10th day of the month of Av, but the Talmud recorded it as occurring on the 9th of Av (Ta’anith 29a). The calamity started on the 9th and ended on the 10th, but the rabbis decided to commemorate the beginning date. There was no dispute as to the year being AD 70. See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 15:1168-69 on the destruction of the Temple by Titus and the four Roman legions under his command.

84 See: Hersh Goldwurm, *History of the Jewish People: The Second Temple Era*, 200-201. Rabbi. Johanan ben Zakkai helped save Judaism from extinction after he fled Jerusalem with its sages just before its destruction. He established the new center for Judaism at Yavneh. Yavneh became the center for the great yeshiva (school) where the study of Torah, teaching, and prayer took the place of the sacrifices in the Temple. Some of the basic tenets of Judaism went through revisions to accommodate the new reality of Judaism without the Temple. Around 200 CE (AD), a second major event kept the Judaism of the rabbis alive. R. Yehudah HaNasi decided that it was of utmost importance to write down the oral law (Mishnah) so that it would be readily available for future generations and protect Judaism from disappearing as a religion. These two events were foundational to keep Judaism alive after the destruction of its Temple. See: *History of the Jewish People: from Yavneh to Pumbedisa*, 89-95.

Temple. Nobody today—and I mean *nobody*—can keep the Law of Moses according to the pattern God laid out at Sinai, not even those who want to!

If you are among those who want to keep the Law of Moses, please understand that you cannot keep it as it was kept when Israel had a Temple and priesthood in Jerusalem. At best, you can approximate a partial observance. The destruction of the Temple and the subsequent obsolescence of the ceremonial priesthood and sacrifices are not my ideas; they are the specific instruction of Hebrews chapters 7 through 10.⁸⁵

Therefore it is foolish to argue with misguided and misinformed people about the fact that “we are not under the law” or “under the works of the law.” The point is moot. None of us could possibly keep the ceremonial aspects of law. The parts of the law that we can and must keep are God’s moral commandments; these have never passed away.

Keep this statement present in your thinking: *God’s moral commandments existed before the Law of Moses; they were incorporated into the Law of Moses; and they continue to exist after the sacrifice of Jesus fulfilled all ceremonial aspects of law.* God’s moral commandments remain in force forever. Being free from the law given to Moses has never implied freedom from responsibility to God’s moral commandments.

God’s Moral Commandments, Sound Teaching, and the Gospel

Let’s return to First Timothy 1:8-9:

We know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not valid for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious... (1 Timothy 1:8-9 NASB).

Paul clearly contrasts those who hold to God’s commandments with the lawless who reject them. Note that the crowd described after the “lawless” are the “rebellious.” They rebel against God’s authority as revealed in His various ordinances.

Those who live in obedience to God’s Word are of another mind; their righteous way of life does not require the imposition of law. Law-abiding people (righteous people in

85 If you are a Messianic Jew who wants to keep the Sabbath, use a prayer shawl and phylactery, observe festivals, and keep kosher, no one can rightfully condemn you for doing so freely; but neither have you the right to condemn and judge non-Jewish believers who choose not to follow suit. This was Paul’s message in Romans 14.

this context) know, for example, that “Do not steal” is God’s law; therefore they will not violate it. Because they do not oppose it, they don’t have to be confronted with it or the consequences of breaking it. Therefore moral law has no power over the righteous.

All of that changes when the righteous break God’s moral law. Then the law and its consequences confront them and they are moved from righteousness into lawlessness and rebellion. It remains so until they repent, because they knew God’s commandments but broke them anyway. Therefore, they are held accountable until the matter is rectified before the Lord. (Ezekiel 33:12-20 gives further scriptural support in this regard.)

Paul is very clear about the scope of lawlessness and of its violation of sound teaching:

*For those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, **and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching**, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted (1 Timothy 1:9b-11 NASB).*

Paul lists some prohibitions here but makes the list more open-ended when he says: “and *whatever else* is contrary to sound teaching.” As I have stated before, this is not the only “negative” commandment list.⁸⁶ Notice that Paul points to sound teaching as a standard. In another place, he refers to the teaching that conforms to godliness and the words of the Lord Jesus (see 1 Tim. 6:3; renderings vary from version to version).

Paul also addresses the gospel itself and connects it to his list of negative commandments, writing: “according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted” (1 Tim. 1:11 NASB).

Negative commandments are the *glorious* gospel? This stands in complete conflict with much preaching I hear in the Church today. Many Christians believe the glorious gospel preaches only “good news,” or more specifically, the things they call “good.”

86 See Galatians 5:19-21; Ephesians 4:17-31; 5:3-7; First Corinthians 6:9-10; Colossians 3:5-9; First Thessalonians 4:3-8. In Romans chapters 12 and 13, Paul mixes both positive and negative commandments in his teaching. These are not all-inclusive lists.

Some say we should only preach salvation, blessing, healing, prosperity, victory, and the like.

I enjoy teaching and preaching on all those subjects, and have done so for many years. But that is not all we are supposed to be sharing when instructing others. I'll say it this way: many preach only the promises and provisions in Christ, but tend to skip the commandments. Why? Because they think the commandments sound like "bad news." The trouble is that they are withholding important moral guidance from God's people!

Good-news preaching that proclaims only God's promises creates a lopsided atmosphere in which people understand little about their relationship with God and their responsibility and accountability as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Lopsided Teaching and Preaching

Presenting a lopsided "gospel" leads to lopsided living in which people and families attend church on Sunday and live for the devil from Monday through Saturday. This is how people arrive at the idea that they can trust God for financial breakthroughs and commit adultery or fornication at the same time. It is the same reason that some believe they can trust God's promises and still steal supplies from work or abuse their spouses. They are certain they can speak to the mountain with authority (see Mark 11:23), regardless of their ungodly conduct.

One unmarried couple comes to mind. They thought they were trusting God for His blessings, but they refused to marry because marrying would mean losing their government checks! That is not trusting God; that is the love of money personified. It is deception and God cannot honor it! (See First Timothy 6:10.)

Another person claimed to believe God for biblical prosperity by creating a Ponzi-type⁸⁷ scheme to make millions. The idea was sold to many Christians as a new "revelation from God" designed to bring the wealth of the sinner into the hands of the just (see Prov. 13:22). Never mind that it was illegal and immoral.

87 A Ponzi scheme is an "investment" system based on the fraud of paying large returns to investors from whatever new capital is invested, rather than from profits earned.

Lopsided teaching has produced some crooked Christians. God help us not to fall into such snares!

These misguided people heard a lopsided message that highlighted only God's promises and said little or nothing about Christian responsibility, accountability, and the absolute necessity for a strong relationship-fellowship with God.

Paul was not a lopsided preacher of the gospel. He talked often about God's grace and power, but without omitting Christian responsibility. Paul taught both the positive and negative commandments. He apparently did not see the prohibitions as "bad news." He saw them as they are—a vital part of God's glorious good news!

Our view of the "gospel message" has gotten off track. We must approach it as Paul did—preaching all of the good news, including God's positive and negative commandments. This is sound teaching. When deprived of it, Christians become spiritually misaligned and lack insight into their relationship-fellowship with God. These people cannot possibly understand how to live as citizens in God's kingdom.

God forgive us for leading anyone down such a path!

It must be said that crookedness and sinful behavior cannot be attributed *only* to lopsided teaching. Hypocrites exist regardless of sound teaching and often hide among the saints in very good churches. They talk the talk and even look the part. But they are like whitewashed sepulchers full of dead men's bones (see Matt. 23:27). Jesus and the Scripture have nothing but contempt for hypocrites and liars.⁸⁸ They pretend, feign, or assume a Christian posture at church or around believers, but they are a sham. Their hypocrisy is a big deal to God because it is partner to the father of lies—Satan (see John 8:44).

Hypocrites aside, many feel convicted of their sin but do not repent because they believe they cannot or do not deserve to get free. That is a lie! Satan's bondage is not nearly as strong as the power of the Holy Spirit to bring freedom. The devil's power (authority) has been broken through the great sacrifice of Jesus (see Col. 1:13). Freedom

⁸⁸ See Matthew 6:2, 5, 16; 23:13-29; 24:51; Mark 7:6; Revelation 21:8.

from the bondage of sin and sinful habits is available; but it must be taught scripturally and applied properly.⁸⁹

Saints and Obedience

Some see themselves as saints, but refuse to obey God's commandments. Let's see what the Word of God says about that:

This means God's holy people [the saints] must be patient [persevere; endure]. They must obey [keep] God's commands and keep their faith in [remain faithful to] Jesus (Revelation 14:12 EXB).

This requires the steadfast endurance of the saints—those who obey God's commandments and hold to their faith in Jesus (Revelation 14:12 NET).

God's holy people are to persevere with their faith in Jesus, but they are to be steadfast in keeping (obeying) the commandments of God. Both are part of the gospel of God through our Lord Jesus.

A great travesty to the faith of Jesus is being committed on many fronts through the denial of God's commandments. In essence, John says that real saints obey the commandments and are consistently faithful in the Lord Jesus. Let us never separate these two powerful aspects of faith.⁹⁰

Why have so many failed to understand that to love Him is to obey Him, and that to believe on Him is to obey His gospel message? (See John 14:21-23; Romans 10:16.) Why do so many minimize the truth that to please God a living faith must be accompanied by actions that line up with Him, His Word, and His commands? (See James 2:22, 26; Hebrews 11:6.)

We have begun answering these questions. My greatest hope is that hearts will perceive and be turned back to truth. The need is great. Even as I write, a great mockery is being made of the gospel through the rejecting and minimizing of God's well-

⁸⁹ See Matthew 5:30; 18:8; Galatians 5:24; Colossians 3:5.

⁹⁰ See also Revelation 12:17; it states that the children are those who obey God's commandments and have the testimony of Jesus. A parallel should be drawn in these two references between having the testimony of Jesus and remaining faithful to Him. There is no testimony of Jesus unless we remain faithful to Him! A second parallel should be drawn between the terms *children* and *saints*. Both words refer to those who persevere (show consistency), obey God's commandments, and remain faithful to the Lord Jesus. These describe real saints and children of God.

documented idea of morality. In this, some influential leaders and churches are rejecting the authentic gospel message that was entrusted to God's holy people.

We are not to sit by and watch deception take hold. We are commanded to contend, as Scripture reveals:

But I felt the need to write you about something else: I want to encourage [exhort; urge; appeal to] you to fight hard for [earnestly contend for; defend] the faith [the authentic gospel message] that was given [handed down to; entrusted to] the holy people of God [saints] once and for all time (Jude 1:3 EXB).

Let us be among those who contend for the faith and uphold obedience to God's commandments without wavering. May we stand strong for an enduring faithfulness and devotion to Jesus that will not quit!

The Preexistence of God's Commandments

This chapter could shake your understanding to its core. We have talked about needing a new paradigm concerning the commandments of God; I believe this chapter will provide it.

Ready? Then let's go!

Most Christians are unfamiliar with a certain Bible truth I have already mentioned briefly. It is glaring, important, and hard to miss once it is pointed out. Here it is: *moral laws have always been a part of God's requirements for man.*

Always means before Moses received the tablets on Mount Sinai, and before the first sin occurred. Can we prove this statement? Yes, and in the mouth of two or three witnesses it will be established (see 2 Cor. 13:1). In fact, I have eight scriptural proofs for you, with the first point covering two witnesses. (Even more are available, if you will search them out.)

Pharaoh and Abimelech refrained from sin: Because of Abraham's fear and sleight of hand, these heathen kings⁹¹ almost had intimate relations with his wife. Notice, I said they were heathen kings. Please note also that these kings lived before Moses was a twinkle in his father's eye. Yet they knew that it was a sin to have another man's wife (see Gen. 20:9; 12:17-19).

How is that possible? The answer is simple: moral imperatives were not initiated when God gave laws to Moses. They were God's laws for all of humanity and were given to human beings from the beginning. These moral commandments existed before the exchange on Mount Sinai and were incorporated into the Law of Moses. They continue to be relevant today. They are also part of the Christian's accountability and responsibility before God and the Lord Jesus.

91 The same thing happened later with Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 26:10.

These commandments have never been removed, made obsolete, or changed. History reveals this truth. How else could two heathen kings know that having another man's wife was a sin? The command, "You will not commit adultery," had to be widely known and these men had to be aware of it. After all, they acknowledged having nearly broken it.

Joseph resisted adultery in Egypt: When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him, Joseph refused to "sin against God" (Gen. 39:9 NKJV). How did he know that accepting her invitation would have been a great evil—especially hundreds of years before the law was given to Moses at Sinai?

Joseph's siblings recognized their sin: How did Rueben and his brothers know they had sinned by selling Joseph into slavery, even when they believed that their brother's behavior produced their anger? There had to be a revelation in the earth that selling human beings into bondage and then lying about it were great sins (see Gen. 42:22; 50:17).

Abraham paid the tithe to Melchizedek. On the positive commandment side, Abraham tithed to the priest of the Most High God (see Gen. 14:18-20). How could he have known to do that unless the principle of honoring God in this manner had been revealed long before Moses wrote about it in Deuteronomy 26 and elsewhere? (Tithing never was exclusive to those "under the law." Therefore the principle remains pertinent today. I know that scandalizes non-tithers; but there it is in Genesis—in black and white.)

Tamar was accused of harlotry. How did those who accused Judah's daughter-in-law of harlotry know that a woman getting pregnant out of wedlock was sin, unless there was already a revelation in the earth prohibiting sex outside of marriage? (See Genesis 38:24.)

Sodom and Gomorrah were judged. How could God judge these cities for their depravity unless such perversions had first been revealed to them as sin? (See Genesis 18:20.) God is not unfair. Sexual perversions, orgies, and sodomy (homosexuality) were well-known to be grave sins, long before Moses came on the scene.

Cain was judged for murdering his brother. How could Cain be judged for killing Abel unless the moral law, "You will not commit murder," had been revealed to Adam

and his descendants? (See Genesis 4:1-16.) What basis would God have for telling Cain that sin was crouching at his door unless God's moral commandments had already differentiated good from evil?

I just gave you seven categories covering eight examples that prove the existence of moral commandments prior to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. If these thoughts are new to you, look up the scriptures listed and convince yourself. But first consider this additional fact: many secular laws are in place around the world *based on* the moral aspects of the law. I thank God for civil laws; without them anarchy would reign on the planet, much worse than what we are seeing already. (Not all civil laws are righteous, of course. That, however, is a topic for another day.)

The pre-Flood generation of Noah could give us firsthand accounts of how anarchy and violence proliferate when moral laws are disregarded. The people rejected God's laws in Noah's day. Lawlessness was rampant, with spiritually dead people doing what they do best—sinning with gusto until the world was judged, and the Flood destroyed almost all life on the planet.

How could God righteously judge the world unless violence and evil had been clearly distinguished from God's standard of love and righteousness? How could He say the earth was evil and full of corruption unless His moral requirements were standing revelation in the earth? (See Gen. 6:5, 11, 12.) As a just judge, God first made His requirements known; only then did He hold the world accountable.

Having revealed His moral code, God held to His standard. Humankind did not, and the results were devastating. When God's moral laws are watered down, ignored, scorned, and despised, sin rules. This pattern is evident today. The same slide into lawlessness has become the tendency, both in the United States and abroad. We are seeing the diluting of God's commandments and the rejection of His idea of morality. It should come as no surprise. Jesus warned that before His visible return to earth, the world's condition would resemble that of Noah's day (see Luke 17:22-36).

In every age, people have violated God's moral commandments. However, such violations never nullify God's laws, which are always good. They make sin stick out like a sore thumb *because* He has taught us what is right (see Rom. 7:13). That is one job His

moral commandments were created to do. Without them, people would lack a clear standard by which to distinguish between right and wrong, righteous and unrighteous, and light and darkness.

So God made His moral laws known, and those who wanted to serve and please Him obeyed them long before Moses was born. The revelation of right and wrong was not hidden from anyone, and anyone who desired to walk with God had the opportunity to do so.

Two ancient men come to mind: Enoch and Job. (More is said later about Job.) Enoch pleased God and walked with Him centuries before the Law of Moses was given on Sinai. Enoch learned God's holy requirements and walked in them for at least three hundred years. Then God whisked him to heaven without Enoch experiencing physical death!⁹²

Laws Given to the Sons of Noah

When you study the laws God gave to Adam and his descendants and those He gave to Noah and his descendants (see Gen. 1–5; Gen. 9:1-17), you find some of the principles God later restated to Moses for Israel's sake.

In the early 1990s, I wrote a lengthy essay for an MBA class on business ethics that focused specifically on the laws evident in the earth before God gave Israel the Ten Commandments and other rules and regulations. My professor was so impressed with the study that the faculty made my paper a permanent part of the university library! I now repent for bragging; Lord, I'll stay humble!

Jewish rabbis have always been aware of these moral laws and have called them *the laws given to the sons of Noah*⁹³ (also known as the Noahide laws). From the Hebrew language of the commandments given to Adam and Noah, the rabbis pinpointed many elements of God's laws to Moses. They therefore believed that God first gave the

⁹² See Genesis 5:22-24; Hebrews 11:5.

⁹³ In Hebrew, *mitzvot b'nei noach*, meaning "commandments to the sons of Noah."

commands that govern humankind to Adam and the sons of Noah. People were then judged based on their obedience or disobedience to them.⁹⁴

The Noahide laws are a documented part of the Jewish tradition. Ancient Talmudic writings list seven laws given to the sons of Noah.⁹⁵ The first six are prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, murder, sexual immorality, theft, and the eating of flesh taken from an animal that is still alive. The seventh Noahide law is a positive command to establish courts of law.

Many civil and judicial laws are founded on these basic laws.⁹⁶ Some scholars believe the conclusions reached by the Jerusalem church in Acts 15 (regarding demands placed upon Gentile converts to the Lord Jesus) were based on an early form of the Noahide commandments⁹⁷ Other scholars reject this view. I will not fuss over the point, except to note the interesting and apparently real connection between the Noahide laws and Acts 15:28-29.

The second century BC book of Jubilees (7:20-33), contains a record of the Noahide commands before their eventual codification in the Talmud:

And in the twenty-eighth jubilee Noah began to command his grandsons with ordinances and commandments and all the judgments which he knew...so that they might do justice and cover the shame of their flesh and bless the one who created them and honor father and mother, and each one love his neighbor and preserve themselves from fornication and pollution (idolatry) and from all injustice...I see your deeds before me because you have not been ones who walked in righteousness because you have begun

94 See "Laws, Noachian," JewishEncyclopedia.com, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9679-laws-noachian> and "Universal Morality: The Seven Noahide Laws," *chabad.org*, *TheRebbe.org*, http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/62221/jewish/Universal-Morality.htm (accessed September 29, 2014).

95 Sanhedrin 56a tells us about these moral commandments revealed from the beginning to Adam and Noah, and passed on to the sons of Noah. Sanhedrin 56b and following explains these commandments. Sanhedrin is a tractate in what is called the Babylonian Talmud (completed around AD 500). Babylon had a large Jewish population and became a major center for Judaism, long before the time of Jesus, and it continued for centuries after the Lord's death and resurrection. The Jews had famous academies for the study of Scripture and rabbinic commentary and interpretation in Babylon. The discussions in these academies became the bulk of what is known as the Babylonian Talmud.

96 Some rabbis suggest that God gave humankind thirty laws in the beginning; others believe there were more than thirty.

97 There are some textual issues to consider in Acts 15. See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 2nd ed., Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25. See also David Flusser and Shmuel Safrai, trans. Halvor Ronning, "The Apostolic Decree and the Noahide Commandments," *Jerusalem Perspective The Apostolic Decree and the Noahide Commandments*, April 2012, <http://notley.net/wp-content/podcasts/ApostolicDecree.pdf>. For general information and sources see article on *Council of Jerusalem* in Wikipedia.

to walk in the paths of corruption...all who eat the blood of any flesh will be blotted out...and you shall not eat living flesh.”⁹⁸

The stories of Cain, Abimelech, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Sodom and Gomorrah, and others testify to God’s pre-Mosaic moral commands. The fact that they were perverted, forgotten, ignored, or disavowed does not deny their existence. The belief of ancient rabbis that the Torah (the law and teaching of God) was revealed to Adam and Noah and their descendants, received and recorded by Moses, and passed on to Israel’s generations is a compelling argument that makes biblical sense, in my opinion.

Other disciplines such as history and archaeology provide additional insight. Hammurabi’s Code of moral and judicial injunctions was preserved on ancient clay tablets and on a human-sized stele written in cuneiform script. These articles pre-date the time of Moses and record laws enacted circa 1700 BC or earlier by the sixth king, Hammurabi, of Babylonia. The tablets and stele bore witness to moral codes for the Babylonian Empire.

Hammurabi’s Code evidently builds upon the earlier codes of Sumer, Assyria, and Eshnunna.⁹⁹ Parallels to the Noahide laws and the Law of Moses are found in these earlier codes.¹⁰⁰ Moses enacted 613 commandments (in Hebrew, *mitzvot*) as directed by God, compared to 282 laws established by Hammurabi. Until God gave the 613 commandments of Torah to Moses on Sinai, the Code of Hammurabi was the most comprehensive in the ancient world.

This begs the question yet again: where did Hammurabi and other ancient lawgivers derive the moral and judicial injunctions that would later appear in the Law of Moses? Everything points to rules given to the ancestors of all humanity: Adam and Noah. It is the only reasonable explanation: moral commandments and laws have existed on Earth since its creation.

⁹⁸ James Charlesworth ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, Vol. 2, 69-70.

⁹⁹ James Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 159-198.

¹⁰⁰ See the very informative book by Aaron Lichtenstein, *The Seven Laws of Noah*, 2nd ed. (Brooklyn: Z. Berman Books, 1986), 12-14. See his reference to the 1948 study by Phillip Biberfeld, *The Bible and Ancient Law Codes* (pgs. 129-156) for a comparison between the Hammurabi, Hittite, and Assyrian codes and the Noahide laws. Interestingly, the Hammurabi, Hittite, and Assyrian codes all have in common with the Law of Moses prohibitions against theft, illicit intercourse, and murder; they also contain many other ethical similarities.

I must emphasize again that after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70, daily blood sacrifices, Temple worship, and all Temple functions of the Levitical priesthood ceased. The laws given to Moses and associated with Temple worship were rendered obsolete. Israel was left only with its moral and judicial commandments, although new, inventive ways were found to keep the feasts and festivals even without the Temple, the priesthood, and daily blood sacrifices.¹⁰¹

Especially for the believer in Christ, but also for Jews, it is impossible to keep the whole law today. The same cannot be said of the moral commandments. These are not tied to the Temple, the Levitical priesthood, feast and festivals, dietary laws, or daily sacrifices. Therefore, they are still required of us.

Spiritual Commandments of God

We have established the connection between God's laws and earthly ones. Now let's focus on the spiritual quality of God's commandments, as mentioned by Paul:

*Therefore the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, and righteous, and good. Did then that which is good become death to me? May it never be! But sin, that it might be shown to be sin, by working death to me through that which is good; that through the commandment sin might become exceedingly sinful. For **we know that the law is spiritual, but I am fleshly, sold under sin** (Romans 7:12-14).*

Paul said the law is holy, good, and spiritual. Without question, he was specifically addressing the moral commandments in these verses, as the context of preceding verses proves:

*What shall we say then? Is the law sin? May it never be! However, I would not have known sin, except through the law. For I would not have known coveting, unless the law had said, "**You shall not covet.**" But sin, finding*

101 They were left with about 200 moral and judicial laws, but from those we should also subtract all dietary laws. Keeping a kosher home is not a requirement for believers in Christ. That was a ceremonial part of law meant only for Israel. See Colossians 2:16-17 and Romans 14. Acts 15:28-29 states the only dietary/ceremonial exceptions—eating blood, strangled animals, and things offered to idols.

occasion through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of coveting. For apart from the law, sin is dead (Romans 7:7-8).

What was the sin that found “an occasion through the commandment”? To which commandment did Paul refer? His example is telling: “You shall not covet.” Clearly this does not indicate the ceremonial law of Temple, priesthood, or sacrifice. It was a moral law-commandment, and according to Paul it is spiritual! So the law being referenced in this discussion from Romans 7 is not ceremonial; Paul pointed to God’s moral commandments.¹⁰²

Many in the Church have thought that the moral commandments of the law are carnal (of the flesh). Some teachers make this claim brazenly; others imply it strongly. Romans 7:12-14 is proof that there is nothing evil, fleshly, carnal, or wrong with God’s moral laws.

Paul never intended freedom from the law given at Sinai to be interpreted as exemption from God’s moral commandments. Why? Because God’s moral commandments have always existed, and have never been the problem. (Paul called them *spiritual*, after all.)

The central problem has always been sin, the spiritual death that separates us from God. There were other problems prior to Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension. Not everybody having the Holy Spirit was certainly one of them, as was the absence of the new birth (the new creation on the inside). The limited system of Temple worship, animal blood sacrifices, and a natural priesthood was also problematic. God desired a *permanent* solution in which His people would be His Temple. He wanted every believer to be a priest and minister of God, which was impossible under the Levitical priesthood.

Thank God Jesus dealt permanently with the sin problem! When we come to Jesus and receive His Lordship, we are made new creations on the inside (see 2 Cor. 5:17). But what is the significance of the term *new creation*? What is new about our hearts or spirits? The answer is that the born-again believer receives a spiritual circumcision in

¹⁰² As I have stated previously, everywhere Paul mentions *law*, it is not referring to the law as a unit. Paul refers to different aspects of law in different places. Romans 7:7-8 is another proof text.

Christ Jesus.¹⁰³ Now we can live in the Spirit instead of by the dictates of the old sinful nature. Now we can be a royal priesthood and a holy nation before Him. We have His holy, righteous, and spiritual commandments—His moral commandments—written in our hearts.¹⁰⁴

Job’s Defense Based on Moral Commandments

Job lived long before God gave His laws on tablets,¹⁰⁵ yet Job defended himself before God using most of what we now call the Ten Commandments (and other moral principles outlined in the written law) as his argument.

Where did Job get these principles? According to some scholars, he was probably a contemporary of Abraham or of Abraham’s father, Terah, living more than four centuries before Moses.

Before Moses wrote down the Ten Commandments, and any other commandments, Job defended his integrity before God by stating his adherence to a godly moral code.

The following passage excerpted from Job 31 documents his claims:

I made a covenant with my eyes not to look with lust upon a girl....He sees everything I do and every step I take. If I have lied and deceived...if I have stepped off God’s pathway, or if my heart has lusted for what my eyes have seen, or if I am guilty of any other sin....Or if I have longed for another man’s wife....For lust is a shameful sin, a crime that should be punished....If I have been unfair to my servants, how could I face God? What could I say when he questioned me about it? For God made me and made my servant, too. He created us both. If I have hurt the poor, or caused widows to weep, or refused food to hungry orphans...(but we have

103 Compare Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:25-26 with Romans 2:28-29. These are the basis for Paul’s statement in Romans 2:28-29. Read the context of each reference. Circumcision of the heart means that one turned to the Lord wholeheartedly and became obedient to His commandments. Instead of transgressing and rebelling against God’s commandments, one became tender before the Lord by being obedient to Him and His Word.

104 See Second Corinthians 5:17-21; John 3:5-7; Hebrews 10:16; Romans 8:9-16; First Peter 1:23; 2:9.

105 Please see a scholarly treatment of the subject with many source references and a very academic approach. Gerard Gertoux, “The Book of Job: When, Where and Why?”, academia.edu, http://www.academia.edu/5613976/The_Book_of_Job_When_Where_and_Why (accessed August 27, 2014). His historical argument is brilliant as he contends with archaeologists who deny the ancient framework of the book of Job by claiming there is a lack of evidence. There are many internal proofs that the book was about a man that lived in patriarchal times. Job lived to a similar age as Abraham (or his father Terah), and he offered sacrifices in the same pattern as the patriarchs in Genesis. The book’s context is glaringly non-Israelite. It is so ancient that some words and segments pose big translation problems.

always cared for orphans in our home, treating them as our own children) ...or if I have seen anyone freezing and not given him clothing or fleece from my sheep to keep him warm, or if I have taken advantage of an orphan because I thought I could get away with it....Let my shoulder be wrenched out of place! Rather that than face the judgment sent by God; that I dread more than anything else. For if the majesty of God opposes me, what hope is there? If I have put my trust in money, if my happiness depends on wealth, or if I have looked at the sun shining in the skies or the moon walking down her silver pathway and my heart has been secretly enticed, and I have worshiped them by kissing my hand to them, this, too, must be punished by the judges. For if I had done such things, it would mean that I denied the God of heaven. If I have rejoiced at harm to an enemy...(but actually I have never cursed anyone nor asked for revenge) or if any of my servants have ever gone hungry...(actually I have never turned away even a stranger but have opened my doors to all)...or if, like Adam, I have tried to hide my sins, fearing the crowd and its contempt so that I refused to acknowledge my sin and do not go out of my way to help others....Look, I will sign my signature to my defense...Or if my land accuses me because I stole the fruit it bears, or if I have murdered its owners to get their land for myself, then let thistles grow [there] ...¹⁰⁶

In chapter 31, Job referred to more than fifteen moral commandments (positive and negative), injunctions, and ordinances, avowing that he had broken none of them. He mentioned lust, lying and deception, adultery, theft, refusing food to the needy, and many other sins he avoided. Job recognized evil acts for what they are—sins against God’s commandments—and he did it centuries before Moses’ birth!

¹⁰⁶ Most of Job chapter 31 is quoted here; a few lines were omitted to conserve space.

How can we not conclude that God’s moral commands were revealed in the earth long before Moses received the tablets at Mount Sinai? God provided guiding moral principles all the way back to Adam at the Creation and Noah after the Flood.¹⁰⁷

Revelation of the Ordinance of God

In Romans chapter 1, Paul teaches that all human beings are given a revelation of the *ordinance of God* and have had unrighteousness defined for them, from the Creation of the earth. Please read the context in Romans 1:18-32. I condense it here and quote the parts most pertinent to our study.

*For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known of God is revealed in them, for God revealed it to them. For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even his everlasting power and divine nature; that they may be without excuse. ...Even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God abandoned them to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil habits...who, knowing the **ordinance** of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:18-20; 28-29, 32).*

The Greek word translated “ordinance” in verse 32 refers to “that which is deemed right (righteous) so as to have the force of law” and “what has been established and ordained by law.”¹⁰⁸ It is sometimes translated as *righteous acts, regulations, and requirements*. They are the divinely revealed moral guidelines God gave all human beings from the outset, even though most have not faithfully obeyed all of them.

107 The ancient rabbis called them in the Talmud, the *Mitzvot benei Noach*, the commandments to the sons of Noah. See b.Tosefta Avodah Zarah 9.4 (c. 300 AD), quoted in Talmud Sanhedrin 56a and b. See Midrash Rabbah: Genesis 34:8, and *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha: Book of Jubilees* 7:20-28 (2nd century).

108 The Greek is *dikaio*. Definition is from Thayer’s G1345. See also BAGD 197c.

God's *ordinance* refers therefore to divine moral rules and requirements that made human beings subject to God's judgments, whether for good or evil. That is why some could be called righteous and upright (as were Abel, Noah, and Job) and why Cain could be told that sin was crouching at his door (see Heb. 11:4; Gen. 6:9; Job 1:1; Gen. 4:7). Moral imperatives had to be in place as guidelines if human beings were to know what sin was and be held accountable for it.

The revelation of right and wrong was set before all human beings from the Garden of Eden. Cain knew what God expected of him because God had revealed His nature and character. His commandments, both positive and negative, were clearly known. This is why the cry of the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah rose up to God and judgment followed (see Gen. 18:20-21). This is why God could judge the world for its wickedness and violence during the time of Noah (see Gen. 6:5, 11-12). Again, this was centuries before Moses. The apostle Paul taught in Romans 1:18-20 that no one has an excuse for sin. God revealed His moral guidelines from the beginning!

The same Greek word translated "ordinance" in Romans 1:32 is also found in Romans 8:4. It tells us that the *requirement* of law (God's moral guidelines) would be fulfilled in those who walk, not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (See the *New American Standard Bible*.) In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul tells us exactly what is according to the flesh, and it has everything to do with behaviors prohibited by the *negative* commandments of God. Likewise, the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23 has everything to do with fulfilling the positive commandments of God!¹⁰⁹

Every fruit of the Spirit mentioned in Galatians 5 has Hebrew equivalents for the Greek words used. They are found in many Old Testament verses in which God's commands and injunctions were issued.¹¹⁰ It is a fruitful study I urge you to make!

109 To love your neighbor as yourself, obey your mother and father, and others are positive commandments because they tell us what we *should* do. The negative commandments are prohibitions—the "you shall/will not" commandments, such as: "You will not have other gods before Me"; "You will not murder"; "You will not covet"; "You will not give false testimony"; and "You will not commit adultery," etc.

110 In order to study the Greek equivalents for the Hebrew words, the Septuagint (LXX) and the *Concordance of the Septuagint* by Hatch and Redpath are extremely valuable. See Bibliography for information on Hatch and Redpath. Then use BDB and HALOT to see the definition of each Hebrew word. It's rich! Many have not seen the importance of studying the Septuagint and the Hebrew behind the LXX as essential, but the LXX is vital in this area of Pauline doctrine. A. Deissman stated over a century ago in *Philology of the Greek Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908), 12-13: "A single hour lovingly devoted to the text of the Septuagint will further our exegetical knowledge of the Pauline epistles more than a whole day spent over a commentary," and "Every reader of the Septuagint who knows his Greek

Reject the Commandments, Reject God's Word

As we have already seen, *the commandments of the Lord* and *His Word* are interchangeable terms, as John the apostle taught in First John 2:3-5. The Word of God is equal to the commandments, and the commandments are equal to the Word of God. This is not new information, but it seems that many in the Church have forgotten it.

The psalmist made clear that the law, commandments, statutes, precepts, testimonies, and ordinances all referred to the Word of God (see Ps. 119:1-20). Moses did the same when referring to the Word of God.¹¹¹ We are taught in Numbers 15:31 that to despise the Word of the Lord is to break His commandment.¹¹²

I reiterate these points to reveal the following: Jesus is the living Word of God who preexisted with the Father before time itself. That Word of the holy, righteous, spiritual, and good commandments of God came and dwelt among us in human flesh; His name is Jesus (see John 1:1-3, 14), and He was the perfect representation of the Father in flesh and bone, the very image of His substance, and the radiance of His glory (see Heb. 1:1-3).

When we understand this, we can see how those in Christendom who reject the commandments of God are also denying that which preexisted with the Father in Jesus, the Word of God. It is serious business to be so blinded as to think you are proclaiming Jesus when you have rejected Him by despising His Word-commandments.

A Statement for the Record

In case I have not made it sufficiently clear, allow me to add this point for the record: My emphases in this book are not made because I *ever* told believers in Christ that they were still under the law. I have never taught this, and anyone who claims I have is not familiar with my ministry or teaching. (Yes. Some have accused me on the basis of hearsay.)

Testament will after a few days' study come to see with astonishment what hundreds of threads there are uniting the Old and the New" (Testaments). But I believe we should take it further and study the Hebrew behind the Greek Septuagint whenever the Scripture is quoted in the New Testament!

111 See Deuteronomy 4:2; 30:11-14; and Numbers 3:16.

112 See also Number 30:1; 36:5; Joshua 1:13; Proverbs 13:13 and others.

What I have taught faithfully is that Christians are not subject to any requirements of law that have to do with blood sacrifices, the Temple, the Levitical priesthood, feasts, festivals, Sabbath days, and circumcision—*because* these were meant only for the children of Israel. Furthermore, no one can keep these aspects of the revelation that God gave Moses on Sinai for Israel.¹¹³ As I have already explained, the Temple is no more; daily sacrifices and the Levitical priesthood have disappeared with it.

Anyone wanting to keep these ceremonial aspects of law is limited to outward forms of compliance without the intended substance. More importantly for Christians: Jesus was the perfect, eternal, and final sacrifice. He is our Passover sacrificed for us and the High Priest and Apostle of even a greater house than Moses had! He is our Sabbath rest, and He is the Lord of the Sabbath!¹¹⁴

No Christian should ever be judged for keeping or not keeping the Sabbath or the feasts and festivals of Israel (see Rom. 14:1-23). Honoring the Sabbath day does not imply greater spirituality; neither is the converse true. Romans chapter 14 *commands* us not to judge one another in these things. Bear with this repetition, for it is vital Christian information too often overlooked. “Let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ” (Col. 2:16-17 NKJV).

The above is truth for all Christians. Yet, all believers remain responsible and accountable before God for keeping the moral injunctions, requirements, and commandments summarized in the walk and commandment of love. This is true even as we live under His great grace in Christ. (Remember that Colossians 2:16-17 is a reference only to ceremonial aspects of law; it *does not* refer to any moral commandments.)¹¹⁵

113 The exception is circumcision, which was a part of God’s covenant with Abraham; but it was only for the physical descendants of Abraham and for those who decided to join Israel spiritually. Romans 2:28-29 fulfills this for us in Christ.

114 As a basis for my comments here refer to: Hebrews 9:12; First Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 3:1-6 and chapter 7; 4:1-11; Matthew 12:8.

115 These are the commandments Paul was referring to in Ephesians 2:15. He was not referring to the moral commandments because he goes on and gives many commandments in Ephesians, chapters 4 and 5, and specifically mentions keeping one of the commandments in chapter 6:1-2. We are set free from ceremonial type commandments, but never moral commandments. Paul had to harp on this because, in his day, the Temple and priesthood were still active. They did not disappear from the scene until the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Circumcision was a commandment only for the physical seed of Abraham. Christians enter into covenant via circumcision in the Spirit through faith-faithfulness in Jesus. Because there is so much misunderstanding in this area, I harp on this!

God's moral laws have existed from the beginning. Through them God spoke to Adam...to Noah...and to Abraham *before* Moses carried the tablets engraved by God to the foot of Mount Sinai. And God's moral laws speak even today.

New Testament Commandments for the Church

In the quest to counter empty traditions and man-made religiosity, many have gone overboard into deep waters. The trend stems from the mistaken idea that true believers in Christ are exempt from any commandments because adhering to rules or moral laws means *not* being under grace.

The idea sounds spiritual until you carefully examine the New Testament, particularly the writings of Paul, which are often cited as justification for this error. We will now establish exactly what Paul said about these ideas. We have already discussed the fallacious belief about the love commandment being the only binding commandment on the Church (see John 13:33-34; 1 John 3:23). Our search of the New Testament “do’s and don’ts” will settle the issue, once and for all. *Do this* or *don’t do this* are the ways positive or negative commandments are stated in the Bible.

The love commandment is the unquestioned royal law of the kingdom of God, and the primary one at that (see James 2:8; 1 Cor. 13:13); but it is far from being the only commandment to the Church. It is instead the summing up of the Ten Commandments¹¹⁶ and all other moral injunctions given by God to Israel (see Rom. 13:9-10).

Paul commanded the churches to abide by many other orders, injunctions, and commandments from the Lord. Why did the Holy Spirit urge him to write down and to preach these orders if the love commandment was the only one left standing? Why didn’t Paul just say, “All you need is love”?

If my argument lacks scriptural proof, then you should absolutely disregard it. Accept nothing from preachers, pastors, or teachers without ample proof, sound context, and confirmation from other scriptures!

If, on the other hand, my point is validated by Paul’s writings, then neither of us can ignore it. Instead, we must renew our minds to God’s Word as revealed through Paul, remembering that Peter called Paul’s writings “Scripture” (see 2 Pet. 3:15-16). Paul’s

¹¹⁶ In Hebrew it is “the ten sayings” or “words.”

letters therefore carry equal weight with the rest of the Bible; and they demand from us equal obedience.

The Nature of Paul's Do's and Don'ts for the Church

Let's examine Paul's writings, beginning with a very pointed warning by which the apostle established the appropriate frame of reference:

If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized (1 Corinthians 14:37-38 NASB).

Do you believe you are a prophet or spiritual person? Are you in a leadership position in your church? Then you recognize that Paul's writings were not kind, sugarcoated suggestions, but direct, no-nonsense commands—not from Paul, but from the Lord. Even a newborn babe in Christ must recognize that Paul's words are not up for dispute. The Lord commanded the Church through him.

Paul taught on many subjects, including the gifts of the Spirit, ministry gifts, and other gifts and functions in the Body of Christ (see 1 Cor. 12–14). He also taught us how to handle them in public assembly through hope (expectancy), faith, and love. These commandments to the Church did not originate in Paul's mind or in a philosophical ideology. *Paul wrote commandments for the Church by the Holy Spirit.*

Whether from the Old Testament or the New, a commandment remains *a commandment*. The Greek word¹¹⁷ used in First Corinthians 14:37 is the same one used to denote any commandment of God, regardless of when it was first declared.¹¹⁸ The meaning of the word *commandment* has not changed or diminished now that we are under grace!

Paul presented obedience in the New Testament perspective when he wrote: “Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping [doing] of the commandments of God” (1 Cor. 7:19 NASB).

¹¹⁷ In the Greek, *entole*; Strong's G1785 from G1781: “injunction...commandment, precept.” Thayer's adds: “a charge.”

¹¹⁸ *Entole* is translated as “commandment” more than sixty times in the New Testament (see Matt. 5:19; 15:3; 19:17; 22:36, 38, 40, for example).

In other words, certain rules were strictly for Israel, but the moral commands were for all of God's people. Paul was serious in this regard, affirming that those who failed to recognize (know or perceive) the divine source of his commands should not be recognized. Yet, some Church leaders continue to recognize believers who deny the commandments of the Lord.

Paul, considered by some to be the pure grace teacher, taught the commandments of the living God to the Church—and he taught us to *do* them! When Paul wrote something not commanded by the Lord, he said so. At other times, he emphasized the Lord's direct commandment, command, or instruction (see 1 Cor. 7:6, 10). Paul spoke plainly; any who reject the validity of moral commandments under grace should read his words and take them at face value.

Notice the Holy Spirit's instruction to Pastor Timothy (via Paul): Timothy was to “keep [do or obey] the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Tim. 6:14). Although Paul mentioned love (among other things Timothy was to pursue), he was not referring solely to the love commandment. Paul gave several orders: he commanded Timothy to flee from the love of money and greed, and to “pursue righteousness, godliness [purity of life and character], faith, love...” and to “fight the good fight” of faith-faithfulness (1 Tim. 6:11-12). These were not the suggestions of Paul, but the commandments of the Lord.

Paul wrote authoritatively and diluted nothing. He never conveyed a pick-and-choose approach. The moral commands were given as strict requirements for all believers. Paul was not tolerant, lenient, or permissive in this regard, as the following examples prove:

Flee from these things and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness... (1 Timothy 6:11 NASB).

Flee sexual immorality... (1 Corinthians 6:18 NKJV).

Glorify God in your body... (1 Corinthians 6:20 NKJV).

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ and do not make provision for the desires of the flesh (Romans 13:14 LEB).

Flee, pursue, glorify, put on, and do not make were not recommendations! If you desire prophetic marching orders they are as follows: Let us flee, pursue, glorify, put on, and make no provision for wrongdoing. Those are marching orders for all Christians!

Notice that Romans 13:12-14 comes *after* Romans 13:9-11, in which Paul explained that love fulfills the moral commandments such as, “‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not covet,’ and whatever other commandments there are...” (Rom. 13:9).

If the love commandment was the end of all requirements, why did Paul bother writing verses 12 through 14? And what should we make of the following imperatives?

*Let us therefore **throw off** the works of darkness, and let us **put on** the armor of light. Let us **walk properly**, as in the day; **not in** reveling and drunkenness, **not in** sexual promiscuity and lustful acts, and **not in** strife and jealousy. But **put on** the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make no** provision for the flesh, for its lusts* (Romans 13:12-14).

Making provision for the flesh manifests the works of the flesh, all of which are violations of God’s moral commands (see Gal. 5:19-21). In a single passage, Paul listed six things we must *not* engage in, one thing and one Person to *put on*, one category to *throw off*, one way to *walk (properly)* and another category for which we should *make no provision*.

These are commandments, and they are clearly stated. They are firm and they are for Christians!

More of Paul’s Commands

Like Moses, Paul left God’s people with many instructions and commands to guide their conduct. Among them is a well-known command with ancient roots: “Be strong in the Lord...” (Eph. 6:10 NKJV).

Paul did not say: “If you get around to it, or if you feel up to it, please be strong.” He simply said, “*Be strong*.” This was God’s command to Joshua. It was later reissued through the prophet Joel. (See Joshua 1:5-9; Joel 3:10.) God did not suggest anything; He

divinely commanded Joshua to be strong. Joel did not plead with God's people to be strong; he instructed them to declare their strength regardless of their weakness.

Ephesians 6 is replete with commands. We are commanded to put on and take up the whole armor of God (see Eph. 6:11, 13 NKJV). We are also commanded: "Stand therefore..." (Eph. 6:14 NKJV). The commands regarding the armor were previously taught in Isaiah 59:17. Never were they offered as suggestions.

Nor were Paul's instructions given as theoretical arguments or reminders of what used to be. The apostle demanded obedience from the Church according to God's will. To those who embrace Paul's commands as theoretical arguments or expired rules, or believe that God's commands oppose His grace, I would say that in God's great plan of salvation, His grace and His commandments are complementary. That is why Paul connected them so integrally in his writings.

Consider the following words: "Children, *obey* your parents....*Honor* your father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise....*Do not* provoke your children to wrath..." (Eph. 6:1-2, 4 NKJV). Paul said that honoring your parents is the first *commandment* with a promise.¹¹⁹ Uh-oh! That was one of the Ten Commandments Paul was referring to—and he said it has authority and application for Christians under grace. (Actually, they *all* do, with the exception of Sabbath-keeping.)

Obey and *honor* are New Testament "do's." And what about the "don't" in Ephesians 6:4—the one about not provoking your children to wrath? Is that not a command? Of course it is! Paul's statement is the unequivocal and emphatic assertion of God's orders.

Consider another "do": "*Be obedient* to those who according to the flesh are your masters..." (Eph. 6:5). This referred to a day when slavery was accepted in society. Godly masters were to treat their purchased slaves with kindness and respect.¹²⁰ We can apply this *in principle* to modern relationships between employees and employers or

¹¹⁹ See Ephesians 6:2; Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16.

¹²⁰ Read Exodus 21:1-11; Deuteronomy 23:15-16; Psalms 123:2; Proverbs 27:18; 30:10.

workers and their managers. Paul addressed such ethical issues elsewhere in Ephesians chapter 6:

Doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men... (Ephesians 6:7 WEB).

Don't threaten... (Ephesians 6:9 CEV).

Not all “do’s and don’ts” govern human relationships. Take, for example: “Do not give the devil an opportunity” (Eph. 4:27 NASB). This instruction addresses an issue that preceded New Testament times. In Genesis chapter 3 Adam and Eve gave place to the devil with profound and evil consequences.

Do you see that New Testament commands adhere to virtually the same format as the Ten Commandments? Yet, some teachers deny the Pauline commandments, saying that grace somehow excludes strict adherence to moral requirements. Paul’s writings tell me that he would never have accepted their argument.

After all, Paul wrote: “*Do not* grieve the Holy Spirit...” (Eph. 4:30 NASB), a command that addressed another longstanding issue. The Lord was grieved by Israel’s rebellion against His commandments over the course of centuries. Israel long defied God and grieved the Holy Spirit many times.¹²¹ Paul simply commanded us not to repeat Israel’s mistakes.

In Our “Business”

Paul admonished Christians to live godly, just as Moses had admonished the Israelites centuries earlier. Consider the following commands of Paul (from the book of Ephesians) and notice how personal they are:

Be kind... (4:32 NET).

Forgiving one another... (4:32 NET).

Be imitators of God...live in love... (5:1-2 NET).

¹²¹ See Psalms 78:40-41; Isaiah 63:10.

Yield [Submit; Be subject; ...yielding/submitting...] to each other out of reverence [respect; fear; awe] for Christ. ...Husbands, love your wives... a wife must respect [reverence...] her husband (5:21, 25, 33 EXB).¹²²

These are part and parcel of our Christian marching orders. The Greek word translated “live” in Ephesians 5:2 more literally means “walk.” When we are admonished to walk in a certain way in accordance with God’s Word and will, we are being commanded to *live* that way.

Paul never hesitated to get into our personal business. The commandments you just read make that clear, as does this one: “But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints” (Eph. 5:3 HCSB). Sexual immorality refers to fornication,¹²³ adultery, homosexuality, incest, and bestiality. Impurity implies anything and everything that violates God’s ways of being and doing. Greed is associated with idolatry, another violation of God’s principles.

Colossians 3:5 and Leviticus 18:6-23 provide lists of forbidden practices that come under the heading of sexual immorality. The existence of these lists reveals the unbroken connection between Old and New Testament commandments. Christians *are* under grace; but they are also called to adhere to God’s eternal and unchangeable standards. Here are a few more (also from Ephesians):

There must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting... (5:4 NASB).

Let no one deceive you... (5:6 NASB).

Do not be partakers with them... (5:7 NASB).

Walk as children of Light... (5:8 NASB).

Do not participate in the unfruitful deeds of darkness... (5:11 NASB).

Awake sleeper... (5:14 NASB).

Be careful how you walk... (5:15 NASB).

¹²² See the references to marriage in Genesis 2:24; 24:67; 26:8; Psalms 128:3; Proverbs 5:18; 12:4; 18:22; Proverbs 31; Deuteronomy 24:5; Malachi 2:14-16.

¹²³ In the Greek, *porneia*.

Contrasts between walking in light and walking in darkness did not originate in the New Testament. Isaiah 2:5 and 9:2 made similar points. Paul’s wording—such as “there must not be,” and “do not” is right in line with the Ten Commandments or any other moral commandments in Old Covenant Scripture. Here again, the idiom “to walk” refers to the conduct and behavior of believers’ daily lives.¹²⁴

The uninterrupted connection between Old Testament commands and those given to the Church is also seen in Paul’s admonitions about wisdom. In Ephesians 5:17, he wrote: “So do not be foolish [ignorant] but learn what the Lord wants you to do [*or* understand the Lord’s will]” (EXB). Doesn’t this remind you of Solomon’s writings in the book of Proverbs, especially the many references about getting understanding and wisdom from God?¹²⁵

Our marching orders include many pertinent warnings, including this one: “*Do not be drunk...*” (Eph. 5:18 EXB). This is yet another New Covenant “do not.” How can we possibly say they don’t exist under grace? Alcohol has created problems for people throughout the ages, as Noah found out.¹²⁶ We Christians need to recognize the danger to ourselves and others. Even if we never drink to the point of intoxication, our imbibing can become a stumbling block to others (see Rom. 14:21).

Paul got into another area of our personal business when he wrote: “*Be filled with the Spirit...*” (Eph. 5:18 EXB). Here again, the subject was not new; but the New Testament iteration represented a change of degree, as was often the case (see 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Before the sacrifice of Jesus the Holy Spirit filled some people.¹²⁷ Granted, the Spirit of the Lord coming on people in the Hebrew Scriptures was sometimes referred to as “the hand of the Lord,” a more common occurrence than being filled. Still, Paul’s command has Old Covenant roots.

¹²⁴ Here are some examples to begin your study: Deuteronomy 5:33; 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 28:9; 30:16; Psalms 1:1; 119:1, 3, 35, 45; 143:8; Proverbs 11:20; Isaiah 30:21.

¹²⁵ A word search of the first four chapters of Proverbs reveals much attention to wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge, and instruction. In Proverbs 4:5-7, acquiring wisdom and understanding is God’s clear command.

¹²⁶ See Genesis 9:20-27. See also Proverbs 20:1; 23:20; 29-35.

¹²⁷ See Exodus 31:3; 35:31; Deuteronomy 34:9.

The list of commands in Paul's epistles is long. I urge you to read Colossians chapter 3, First Thessalonians chapter 4, and Romans chapters 12 and 13, for example. Remember that Paul gave these commandments in the context of (and based upon) Hebrew Scripture and its moral imperatives.

Obviously, Paul did not dismiss Hebrew Scripture. Second Timothy 3:16-17 explains he considered it completely authoritative, inspired by God, and profitable (advantageous, beneficial) for teaching, reproof, correction, for training (discipline) in righteousness. The Hebrew Scripture made God's people fit, complete, and equipped (ready, prepared fully) for every good work. The apostle did not invent a new doctrine of grace to replace the ancient commands. God forbid! To believe such an idea means we must deny and delete verses and whole chapters from the New Testament, and especially from Paul's epistles.

Jesus and Paul Opposed Man-Made Religious Rules

There *are* some do's and don'ts to run from—they are the man-made religious rules that have no foundation in Holy Writ. These *commandments* or *traditions of men* (see Mark 7:7-8 NKJV) are evidence of dead religion. Paul and Jesus rebuked them because they invalidate Scripture.¹²⁸

The Jews invented numerous commandments that were unsupported by Scripture. Yet, Jewish leaders passed them off as requirements from God. “Don't handle! Don't taste! Don't touch!” (Col. 2:21 NLT) were some of these man-made laws. They went above and beyond God's Word and often obscured His intended point.

The Jews are not the only ones who have fabricated rules. Modern Pentecostal churches invented many stipulations concerning women.¹²⁹ They said, “Don't wear makeup. Don't use perfume. Never wear jewelry!” God never said women had to avoid any of those things to please Him! He only wanted them to be modest, not relying on hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry to win over their ungodly husbands. A “meek and quiet spirit” was to be their witness (1 Pet. 3:4 KJV; see also 1 Pet. 3:1-3).

¹²⁸ See Mark 7:1-13; Titus 1:14; Colossians 2:22.

¹²⁹ It is not my intent to “pick on” Pentecostals. Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, and many more denominations have unbiblical rules. I use the example of the Pentecostals because I know them up close and personal!

Neither Jesus nor Paul appreciated fabricated commandments. Many of those created by the Jews and found in the Mishnah or the writings of the supposed oral law served only to invalidate God's commandments. They were severely rebuked by Jesus and Paul; Paul said these injunctions were myths (see Titus 1:14).

An excellent example of the hypocrisy of man-made laws was pointed out by Jesus, because it contradicted the commandment to honor one's parents, which sometimes means helping them financially. The Jewish leaders "ruled" that those who offered their possessions to God as potential gifts¹³⁰ were free from the requirement to honor their parents financially. They invalidated the Word of God through a tradition that God never ordained (see Mark 7:13).

That is the traditional junk we should flee!

Jesus and Paul were not against the commandments of God; they were against man-made ones.

Jesus Requires More From His Disciples

Some think Jesus "softened" God's moral requirements. Is that really so? Did Jesus relax the demands of law and make moral standards more lenient for the Christian under grace? These are very basic questions about the ministry of Jesus and His expectations of His disciples. They must be answered accurately, so please listen to the Master's words:

You have heard that it was said [under the law], "You shall not commit adultery;" but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28 WEB).

According to this verse, Jesus' requirement for discipleship and kingdom living is *more* demanding than it was under the law, not less. The love commandment observed under grace is not less stringent than the individual commands it incorporates. It is tougher and weightier than the moral law ever was.

¹³⁰ In the Greek, *corban*, of Hebrew and Aramaic origin, according to Strong's G2878.

This truth forces a major adjustment in our understanding of love, so let's keep in mind these important points:

1. The commandment of love includes all the commandments, because no one who loves will commit murder or adultery. You certainly will not covet if you are walking in love; nor will you steal.¹³¹ If you keep the love commandment intact, you will never violate the body of God's moral laws.
2. Love is like a wall in the spirit world surrounding the commandments and protecting them from being dishonored and disobeyed. Those who allow love to keep them in the higher realm of the God who is love, do not violate His Word. Sin breaks through the wall of love and allows the serpent to "bite" the believer with the payment for sin, which is death (see Eccles. 10:8; Rom. 6:23).
3. Jesus' higher requirements called His followers into a realm of love that benefited them and honored God's commandments.
4. The love commandment is a higher order in the spirit world because "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Nothing is higher than God.
5. Love keeps us from gazing at others in lust or from committing any other violation against God's commandments. The law (under the blood of bulls and goats) could not do this for Israel.

Jesus vividly expressed in His teachings the more stringent demands of kingdom living for his disciples. Study the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 through 7 (especially 5:21-22; 31-39). Jesus referred to these greater demands and taught that the righteousness of His followers was to supersede that of the scribes and Pharisees (see Matt. 5:20). Jesus expects more from His followers than was demanded of the religious folk who misrepresented God's commandments.

Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill. For most certainly, I tell you, until heaven and earth

¹³¹ Study Romans 13:9-11.

pass away, not even one smallest letter or one tiny pen stroke shall in any way pass away from the law, until all things are accomplished [to become...to come into existence...to appear...appear in history...come upon the stage].¹³² Whoever, therefore, shall break [dissolve,¹³³ undo, dismiss, break up, annul¹³⁴] one of these least commandments, and teach others to do so, shall be called least in the Kingdom of Heaven; but whoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew 5:17-19 WEB).

Other passages from the Gospels similarly reveal the greater demands of Jesus' teaching over the demands of the law. Jesus was clear: the commandments should not be annulled until all is fulfilled on the stage of history. This was not a reference to the coming of Messiah as Redeemer. That was the beginning of redemption history, not the conclusion. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross set the stage, but history is still underway.

Until His physical return to rule and reign on Earth and until the fulfillment of Revelation chapters 21 and 22, God's redemption history will be incomplete. It *will* come to pass in the new heavens and new earth, however. Righteousness will dwell there forever because death, pain, the curse, and all evil will be forever removed and cast into the lake of fire. At that point there will be no need for moral laws of any kind. No one will ever break moral law again! Once we enter eternity in an incorruptible state (like Jesus), sin and death can never touch us (see 1 Cor. 15:20-58).

Glory to God!

While on this side of that glorious eternity, our moral requirements as Christians demand a higher level of purity because we are born of the Spirit of God and have the Spirit of Christ inside us. We have supernatural help available to us that was not available before the cross. In addition, the Holy Spirit has written the moral requirements of God in the born-again spirit. If ever a generation should have walked in higher levels of purity it should be us—the Body of Christ.

¹³² In the Greek, *ginoma*—Thayer's coded to Strong's G1096.

¹³³ In the Greek, *luo*—Strong's G3089. See also the *New American Standard Bible*.

¹³⁴ Dictionary.com, *Dictionary.com Unabridged*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/break>, s.v. "break." (accessed September 10, 2014).

Morality is a fact of life when we walk in love,¹³⁵ which is integral to walking in the Spirit, which in turn means walking in the fruit of the Spirit. When we keep our love walk intact, we are not subject to the law, and we are kept from every work of sin and death!

Remember that after Jesus was raised from the dead He taught His followers to make disciples of all nations *teaching* them to observe (*do*) all that He commanded them (see Matt. 28:19-20). According to Jesus in Matthew 5:19, greatness in the kingdom of God is assigned to those who *do* and *teach* the commandments of God! People with ungodly lifestyles might think less of God's obedient ones, but He sees according to *His* holy standards, not human ones. Some may hate, mock, and trivialize God's commandments and exalt those who believe what they believe. However, those who annul or dismiss even the least (smallest) of the commandments and teach others to do the same will receive the least honor and respect in God's kingdom. He will look at them and say, "You are a zero minus nothing!"¹³⁶

What do you want: the glory of men or the glory that comes from God? Are you looking for people to praise you? Do you seek worldly popularity among peers or do you want to be a friend of God? Do you want to be trendy and acceptable to the world and its ungodly standards or do you yearn for God's glory? Which is it?

Are you looking in the mirror of God's Word? What does the reflection tell you?

135 See Romans 13:9-11; Galatians 5:13-18; Romans 8:2.

136 This is my way of expressing the word translated least in Matthew 5:19 on BAGD 248b-2, *ελαχιστος*, that means: very small, quite unimportant, and insignificant. Liddell & Scott 531a adds: infinitesimal and minute. It so tiny that if God says you are insignificant and infinitesimal that means zero minus nothing! In fact it is so tiny that Merriam-Webster states that infinitesimal means "immeasurably or incalculably small." Some synonyms are: atomic, bitsy, bitty, tiny, itty bitty, microminiature, microscopic, miniature, miniscule, teensy-weensy, teeny-weeny, wee, and weeny! Food for thought.

Faith, Grace, Works, and God’s Commands

The following verse might curl the toes of those who believe that faith in Christ eliminates the need for God’s moral laws: “Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be! No, [through faith] we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31 WEB).

It is important to realize that Paul was referring in this verse to God’s moral commandments, as the context of Romans chapters 1 through 3 attests. These chapters are not about animal sacrifices, Temple worship, and other ceremonial or Israel-only issues.¹³⁷

The Greek word rendered “nullify” in Romans 3:31 is defined in *Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* as: “render idle...inactive, and inoperative...to deprive of force, influence and power...do away with, annul, abolish...to cease, to pass away.”¹³⁸ Paul clearly contradicts the assertions of those who believe in a command-less gospel. According to him, true faith-faithfulness makes God’s moral commandments firm or established.¹³⁹

Did Paul Contradict Himself?

Romans 3:31 shows that our faith-faithfulness in Christ does not render God’s moral law obsolete, and that it actually establishes it. Paul also addresses the status of the ceremonial laws not addressed in chapters 2 and 3. Of these he writes: “Christ is the end of the law, with the result that there is righteousness for everyone who believes” (Rom. 10:4 NLT).

Unless they are viewed in context, Romans 3:31 and 10:4 appear to contradict each other. But Paul never demonstrated double-mindedness or a schizophrenic streak—*never!*

¹³⁷ Though Paul mentions physical circumcision in chapters 2 and 3 (a commandment only for the physical descendant of Abraham), he stresses that obeying God’s moral commands is for the Gentiles who follow them as though they were physically circumcised (see Rom. 2:25-29). The emphases in Paul’s argument are solidly about obeying moral commandments from the heart, and about placing trust and being faithful in the blood of Jesus (see Rom. 3:21-26), which are eternal and applicable to all. Actually, to be more accurate, and to state it in order as Paul does from chapters 3 through 6, the Christian is to first trust in the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus; then, after the initial encounter with the Lord, to live in lifelong obedience to God’s holy requirements.

¹³⁸ In the Greek, *katageo*—Thayer’s G2673; TDNT 1:452, 76.

¹³⁹ Thayer’s G2476; TDNT 7:638, 1082—the Greek meaning to set, make firm, uphold, sustain the authority or force of.

The statements are both compatible and exactly right. Yet those who lack Bible literacy or too readily accept the interpretations of others point to these statements to prove their version of truth or to claim that the “contradictions” prove the Bible was the work of men and not divine inspiration.

How should we approach and resolve the wrong idea that Paul contradicted himself in Romans 3:31 and 10:4? The earlier verse is a bold declaration that God’s moral commands are still active and that believers in Christ are responsible to obey them. The latter (10:4) directly confirms that when Jesus died as our substitute, He made a way into God’s presence that the Israelite nation had never before been given.

Israel’s Old Covenant relationship and access to God relied on a human priesthood and the spilling of blood from sacrificial animals. These sacrifices provided atonement for sin, but it was temporary (which is why the sacrifices were repeated). Jesus, the perfect Lamb, went to the cross in our place *once and for all*. His role as the Christ-Redeemer means that no other blood sacrifice is needed for cleansing from sin as was required under the law. In this regard, He is the eternal sacrifice—the end or fulfillment of the law. Therefore, Christ is the end (aim, purpose) of ceremonial law for righteousness to everyone that trust and obeys (believes)!

Paul never intended this freedom from the Law of Moses to be interpreted as a release from God’s moral commandments. Christ fulfilled all ceremonial law. There are no further sacrifices to be made, for example. But He did not remove the moral commandments. As we have already seen, God’s moral commandments have always existed in the earth, and are still with us today. They existed prior to the law, were incorporated into the law, and continue long after the sacrifice of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple at Jerusalem.

Paul did not contradict himself. His statements in Romans 3:31 and 10:4 resound in divine harmony! They reveal two sides of his commentary on the laws of God, moral and ceremonial.

Which “Works” Did Paul Oppose?

Many misunderstand Paul's phrase "the works of the law."¹⁴⁰ (Don't feel badly if this is you; I also misunderstood it for a long time.) Paul used *works of the law* or *works* when referring to religious tradition that contradicted Scripture and grew around God's solemn commandments. Paul also used these terms when referring to circumcision and other ceremonial commandments not required of Gentile converts. Christians were not saved by these "works" but through faith-faithfulness in what Jesus accomplished *for them* and provided as part of His great grace (see Eph. 2:4-8).

Paul had powerful reasons to come against these "works" or "works of the law." Was it because there was something inherently wrong with the law or because it was based in fleshly works? How could this be true when Paul taught that the moral law of God was righteous (just), holy, spiritual and good?¹⁴¹ Yet, some in our day claim that the moral law stands in opposition to faith. Setting this error right is massively important, so let's do it by determining which "works" Paul was against.

As we have seen in the book of Acts, believing Jews tried to force circumcision on Gentile converts to Christ. In the book of Galatians Paul opposed this prerequisite for salvation. The early Church concluded (see Acts 15:23-29) that Gentile Christians were not required to be circumcised and keep the law¹⁴² (except for a few basic mandates).

Paul negated the requirement of circumcision because it applied only to Israel. However, his epistles contained many other moral and ethical requirements for the Church (as we have seen), but did not equate them with works or "works of the law." Paul took no issue with circumcision in and of itself; he refuted only the imposition of circumcision upon Gentile converts as a prerequisite for salvation.

140 For further study see, James G. D. Dunn, *The Justice of God: A Renewed Perspective on Justification by Faith*, JTS, (1992) 43 (1): 1-22, pgs. 13-15. C. E. B. Cranfield, opposes Dunn's perspective on works of the law as only obedience to the commandments of circumcision, Sabbaths or food laws in "The Works of the Law" in the *Epistle to the Romans*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 1991 14: 89-101. Cranfield states that Paul was referring to obedience to the Law of Moses in general. I see evidence in Paul's epistles that "works of the law" in his mind included: keeping the invented commandments of men (that made void God's Word); rote keeping of the law "for show" and not from a heart of faith-faithfulness; and the obligation to keep the ceremonial commandments given specifically to Israel. For Paul, these "works" were rightly opposed; but were separate from God's moral commandments which were to be kept. Scriptures already mentioned—from Acts, Galatians, Romans, Colossians, and the words of Jesus in the Gospel accounts—prove this often overlooked fact.

141 See Rom. 7:12, 14; 8:4.

142 See Acts 15:5.

We must also realize that Paul faced a peculiar set of circumstances that we do not. The early Church was comprised primarily of Jewish believers in Messiah who sought to apply to Gentile Christians the rules under which they had been raised. Paul's discussion of "grace versus law" addressed *this specific set of circumstances*. Modern interpretations of "grace versus law" do not address the specific concerns Paul faced.

Paul did not hate God's law or anything that looked Jewish, as many claim. He was a Middle Eastern Jew, not a Westernized Christian! The popular modern assessment is generally imbalanced and misleading. At its root, it is often a blunder in interpretation!

Here is the shocker for those who view Paul in this Western light: many modern Christian theological interpretations would have been foreign to Paul (or at best, incomplete). He would be amazed that entire schools of theology ignore God's revelation or strip the Bible of everything supernatural. He would not tolerate the Western theological training that divides the Hebrew text into man-made J, E, P, or D sources common to the outdated and so-called higher textual criticism.

Paul would be outraged, and might even call such views blasphemous.

Let's renew our minds to this fact: Paul was a Middle-Eastern Jewish man trained as a rabbi under Gamaliel, one of the famed leaders of the Pharisees (see Acts 22:3). That is as far away from Western ideology and theology as you can get! About as far, in fact, as the East is from the West (pun intended).

Paul's theological training shone brightly in his epistles. Regrettably, many try to make him speak modern-day Christianese. They reinterpret his teaching through the lens of their Christian denominations, movements, and individual belief systems.

That is not the correct way to interpret Scripture. Rather than dragging Paul into the twenty-first century, we must go back, historically and culturally, to his day. To accurately interpret his teachings, we must study them in their first-century, Jewish, and Middle Eastern context. Paul's argument centered on his opposition to Jewish Christians who forced Gentile converts to adopt Jewish requirements. When you get this point settled, you come a long way toward understanding Paul's epistles.

More about Context

Thank God Luke recorded the context of the original “grace versus law” arguments. These arguments centered on the grace of the sacrifice of Jesus as atonement versus the ceremonial sacrifices and law meant only for Israel. Luke’s accounts are so simple, yet they bring great clarity to the conflict:

Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question. . . . But some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed stood up saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.” (Acts 15:1-2, 5 NKJV).

The debate was huge, and the outcome was hugely consequential. In the end, the leadership of the church at Jerusalem agreed with Paul: Gentile males who came to Christ were not required to be circumcised or to keep the portions of the law meant only for Israel (see the remainder of Acts 15). Paul’s epistle to the Galatians cannot be accurately understood outside the context of this debate and the decisions reached as a result.

Galatians 2 begins with Paul in Jerusalem. He traveled there with Barnabas and Titus, and confronted Peter over the issue. (Galatians 2:13 adds that even Barnabas became entangled in the error.) Paul’s argument addressed all sides of the conflict; one of its purposes was to bring correction to his Jewish brethren. Having received Christ as their Messiah, they continued in meaningless repetitions and in traditions that contradicted God’s law.

Judaism in general was at an all-time low. Instead of following the example of Abraham’s faith-faithfulness, Jews made a religion out of circumcision, the Temple, the synagogue, and animal sacrifice. They had drifted far from God’s intent—the covenant life demonstrated by the patriarchs.¹⁴³

Paul addressed the drift and the irony of Gentiles enjoying covenant with God:

¹⁴³ See Habakkuk 2:4; Romans 1:17; Hebrews 10:38.

What shall we say then? That the Gentiles, who didn't follow after righteousness, attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith [faith-faithfulness]; but Israel, following after a law of righteousness, didn't arrive at the law of righteousness. Why? Because they didn't seek it by faith [faith-faithfulness], but as it were by works of the law... (Romans 9:30-32 WEB).

Some key facts are revealed in this passage. The law of God was “a law of righteousness” and not something evil. Israel missed this intent of this law because they failed to embrace it in faith-faithfulness. Rather, they tried to approach it “by the works of the law.”

The problem Paul saw was not inherent to the law or God's teachings to Israel.¹⁴⁴ The problem was the same one Jesus had confronted among the religious Jews of His day. Frankly, it is the same problem we see in churches now.

What should have been about faith became a law of works.¹⁴⁵ The faith-faithfulness that comes from a heart of love, obedience, and devotion to God was replaced with a complicated menu of actions that had nothing to do with (and in many cases opposed) covenant faith. Paul's message was this: Israel made the law useless and unbefitting.

Paul was in agreement with Jesus' own view that Israel had made the law contrary to God and His Word:

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do. For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments....And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who

¹⁴⁴ *Torah* is the Hebrew word translated “law.” It is better translated as direction, instruction, or teaching rather than the flawed English translation of law; but that is another book in itself.

¹⁴⁵ Please carefully read these verses: Romans 2:28-29; 3:27-31.

humbles himself will be exalted. ...For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in. ...Fools and blind! ... “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone. Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! ...For you cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may be clean also. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness. Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:1-5; 12-13, 17, 23; 24-28 NKJV).

What an indictment! The Jews had a traditional, outward form of godliness, but they denied its real power (see 2 Tim. 3:5). They omitted judgment, mercy, and faith-faithfulness. Like Jesus, Paul opposed any “show” that lacked power, failed to demonstrate and reveal God, or required no faith-faithfulness. These works were performed for the notice of others. They sought the glory of men instead of the glory of God.

Jesus rebuked certain Pharisees who exalted themselves and did not live what they taught.¹⁴⁶ Their hearts were full of robbery and excess, but they mastered a hypocritical

146 Not all Pharisees were hypocrites or evil. This negative conclusion could be drawn if only a few verses are considered to the exclusion of others. There were devoted and godly Pharisees; Nicodemus was one (see John 3:1; 7:50-51). John 12:42 tells us many of the synagogue rulers (themselves Pharisees) became disciples of Jesus, though they kept it hidden from the leaders of the sect. A great many of the priests and an unknown number of Pharisees became disciples of the Lord Jesus (see Acts 6:7; 15:5). This contradicts the uninformed idea that all Jews rejected Jesus. For the first ten chapters of Acts, only Jews (and “mixed” Jews, the Samaritans) followed Jesus. These followers numbered in the many thousands! Gentiles were not found in the churches until Peter preached the gospel to Cornelius’ household in Acts 10 (which may have been ten to fifteen years after Jesus was raised from the dead). Truthfully, anti-Jewish sentiment developed from the prevalent idea in Gentile Christianity that Jews rejected and crucified Jesus—even though it was the Romans (Gentiles) who crucified Him. Yes, Jewish leaders and a

outward show for the crowds. They desperately needed to humble themselves and repent. Instead, they majored in matters of low importance, and minored in issues that made the covenant most meaningful. The tradition and religion they created out of the law was contrary to the faith-faithfulness of Abraham and David revealed in Romans chapter 4. Instead of walking by faith-faithfulness in God's covenant, they rejected what the patriarchs had embraced: God's covenant grace through obedience to His revealed Word.

Religious and hypocritical Pharisees presumed upon God's approval of their man-made ways of law-keeping (which opposed the faith-faithfulness of Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the rest of the prophets). Their religious works outside the covenant were the ones Jesus and Paul disdained. Anything they did in agreement with God's covenant and Word was obedience, which was considered praiseworthy.

This was another facet of Paul's anointed and powerful argument, a simple correction of the man-made religious practices that permeated the Jewish religion but justified no one. Though they looked, smelled, and felt like God's law, they bore no

mob of Jews demanded His death, but not all Jews wanted it. In the process of time anti-Jewish sentiment among Gentile Christians developed into deep-seated anti-Semitic feelings against all things Jewish, including the law and commandments. There was a sharp distinction drawn between Jews and Christians, and anti-Semitism flourished in Gentile Christian circles, leading to discrimination, hatred, and finally to executions in the name of "Christ" all over Europe and the Middle East. I don't have the space to tell you about the atrocities committed during the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Russian pogroms. Gentile Christian ideology supported these evils because Jews were slandered, persecuted, considered subhuman, and demonized. Read sometime the anti-Semitic and hateful statements about Jews written by the "Church fathers" Justin Martyr, Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, and Calvin. This is one reason to take some of their teachings with a grain of salt! The "father" of the Reformation, Martin Luther, was a virulent Jew-hater who wrote a number of lengthy treatises about forcing Jews to convert or banishing them if they refused. He also taught that they did not deserve to live, and said their books and synagogues should be burned. That was the man who birthed the theology of "justification by belief alone" so faithfully followed by much of Christendom! Everything Luther taught and preached becomes suspect to me because it came from a hater bound by darkness. We are to hate sin but never are we to hate people! No, we are not throwing out the baby with the bath water. There never was any baby to begin with and the bathwater smelled bad! I cannot repeat in this book many of the vile things he believed and wrote against the Jews. Luther's anti-Jewish writings were favorites of the Nazis and Hitler, who used them as propaganda to uphold their racist views. At the Nuremberg war-crime trials, some Nazi leaders used Luther's writings as evidence and justification for their hatred and the "final solution" carried out in the murder of six million Jewish men, women, and children in the Holocaust. They believed that Luther endorsed their "right" to send Jews to the gas chambers! Luther's anti-Semitic writings are still used in Neo-Nazi, Ku Klux Klan, and other Jew-hating propaganda worldwide. I highly recommend a book by a Roman Catholic priest, Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-Three Centuries of Antisemitism*. Another book that will open your eyes is by Joshua Trachtenburg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Anti-Semitism*. There are others.

resemblance to the covenant keeping that justified Abraham and David (see Rom. 4:1-24). When you understand this point, the entire book of Romans opens up!

Life from the Inside Out

Jesus and Paul were after lives of holiness, power, and grace that flowed from the inside out, and not the other way around. Religion pursues the opposite effect. It props up an external show, not to glorify God, but to get the attention of people and perpetuate dead traditions.

This can *never* work for the glory of God. People might praise religious appearances, but appearances do not equate with living for God. Instead, they are like whitewashed sepulchers full of dead men's bones! (See Mark 7:1-13; Matthew 23:27.) Works of the law cannot draw upon the grace of God in Christ! The works that please God must *first* come from the inside. Then, in faith-faithfulness, they are manifested outwardly for His glory.

This distinction is more than a fine point. It has eternal implications, as Paul explained:

[God] *who will pay back to everyone according to their **works*** [see Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12]: *to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory, honor, and incorruptibility, eternal life; but to those who are self-seeking, and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, will be wrath and indignation, oppression and anguish, on every soul of man who works evil, to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. But glory, honor, and peace go to every man who **works good**....For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law will be justified* (Romans 2:6-10a; 13).

Paul emphasized here that only those who acted on God's Word (law) by faith-faithfulness were made righteous or justified. In discussing the working out of good and evil, Paul pointed to the heart. If the instruction of God was written within, it would manifest in visible works—the good works of those who are doers of the Word. Notice

how “works” and “works good” (*i.e.*, the working of good) were required for doers of the law (God’s Word) to be justified.¹⁴⁷

The outward show is not the “whole show.” Faith-faithfulness must be involved. It begins in the heart or spirit (see Rom. 10:10) and works its way to the outside. This is what Jesus meant when He said that either good or evil things are produced out of the abundance of the heart (see Matt. 12:33-37). It is also similar to what James taught about the connection among faith, righteousness, and works (see James 2:14-26).

Paul taught that we should “work out” our own salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12-13 NIV). This has nothing to do with getting salvation by our own efforts. That would be a dumb idea, because Jesus got our salvation for us! It was the free gift of God’s mercy and grace received in the new birth (see Eph. 2:4-10). Now, we must bring that salvation to the outside and let it shine brightly.

Scripture is clear about how we must model our behavior:

Dear friend, don’t let this bad example influence you. Follow only what is good. Remember that those who do good prove that they are God’s children, and those who do evil prove that they do not know God (3 John 1:11 NLT).

Dear friend, do not imitate what is bad but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does what is bad has not seen God (3 John 1:11 NET).

We are to imitate and do what is good, rejecting all evil. Through salvation, God put His good in us; but He wants our acts to embody it. Doing good¹⁴⁸ means doing what is

147 The disassociation of righteousness as a gift (by belief alone) and righteousness as what you do according to the covenant is precisely one of the things corrected by James and John. Refer to James 2:21-25; First John 2:29; 3:7, 10. According to Romans 2:13, Paul taught that justification (being made righteous) includes obedience to the moral code—God’s law. Justification is both by faith in the blood or sacrifice of Jesus and by works that are according to the covenant (obedience to God) after our initial encounter with the Lord. One cannot be disassociated from the other and be called New Testament righteousness. Righteousness by belief alone is not sustainable by the New Testament Scriptures when taken as a whole. I closely defined *faith* and *believing* earlier in this book to, among other things, correct the false “belief only justification” theology. I know this is unconventional and may seem borderline with a “justification by works” theology but I also reject that type of theology because it would mean that we do not need what Jesus did for us. That would be blasphemous! I embrace a theology of righteousness (justification) by faith (trust and commitment) in Christ’s redemptive work and in His Lordship over us, and also to faithfulness and loyalty to God and His holy commandments (obedience) as proof of His righteousness accounted to us as a free gift in the regeneration of the Spirit.

148 In the Greek, *agathopoieo*—Thayer’s G15; TDNT 1:17, 3.

right and good and avoiding sin and rebellion against God’s moral laws.¹⁴⁹ This is not a passive life. After we are born from above, God expects us to use what He deposited in us for His glory (see John 15:8).¹⁵⁰

Jesus and Paul wanted to draw people into a deep relationship with God in the inner man—one that would affect everything outward by God’s power and presence (see Rom. 2:28-29). This was God’s original intent for the Jewish people, but they turned it into a religion loaded with tradition and devoid of power (all outward and incapable of producing lasting results).

God desired circumcised hearts that were tender before Him, keeping His commandments in every outward act. When we commit our lives to Jesus, the Holy Spirit writes God’s laws in our hearts and our journey begins. It continues with our holding fast in devotion to God as we act upon His guiding principles.¹⁵¹

Making the Word of God Void

Jesus was not intimidated by the traditions of men. He revealed the corruption that permeated Jewish leadership. (Paul did the same in Romans chapters 2 and 3.) We referred earlier to Mark 7:1-13; it records Jesus’ scathing rebuke to those bound up in religious traditions. The passage is powerfully revealing, as the first five verses show!

Then the Pharisees and some of the scribes came together to Him, having come from Jerusalem. Now when they saw some of His disciples eat bread with defiled, that is, with unwashed hands, they found fault. For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands in a special way, holding the tradition of the elders. When they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other things which they have received and hold, like the washing of cups, pitchers, copper vessels, and couches. Then the Pharisees and scribes

149 It is the same word used in First Peter 2:15, 20; 3:6.

150 The parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 is a case in point. For “born again” see “born from above” in John 3:5-8, First Peter 1:23-25. See NET version and notes.

151 For this paragraph, see Deuteronomy 10:12-16; Hebrews 8:10; 10:16; Proverbs 3:1; 4:4; First John 5:2-3; Second John 1:6.

asked Him, “Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?” (Mark 7:1-5 NKJV).

The Pharisees demanded hand-washing and other rituals not revealed to Moses at Sinai. These “traditions of the elders” were not scriptural commandments, yet they persisted and became part of what is known as the oral law or *Mishnah*.¹⁵² This was later discussed in rabbinic academies in Babylon and Jerusalem. These discussions, known as *gemara*, together with the text of the *Mishnah*, became known as the Talmud (both the *Bavli* and the older but shorter *Yerushalmi*).

Rabbinic Judaism held (as many Jews believe today) that God also gave these laws to Moses on Sinai. There was no direct scriptural foundation supporting the idea, though indirect references were sought in hindsight. To Orthodox Jews, these oral commandments and traditions have the same authority as the written text of Scripture, and doing anything contrary to them is sin.¹⁵³

Before we look sideways at Jews, we must ask ourselves: Have we formulated a bunch of man-made rules that have no basis in Scripture? Yes we have! Are churches doing things that God never instructed in the Bible? Yes they are!

The issue is as relevant today as it was in the time of Christ, therefore His response also remains relevant. Let’s return to Mark 7:

He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups,

152 I am not making a blanket statement about the *Mishnah*. *Mishnah* tractate *Avoth* contains moral maxims of the ancient rabbis, and is a testimony to righteous rabbis. Other tractates shed light on a number of New Testament passages. Some familiarity with the *Mishnah* is beneficial for the studious Christian.

153 On the subject of oral law, there are conflicting views among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. Orthodox Judaism teaches strict adherence to oral law. They teach that Moses received the oral law at Sinai, at the same time as he received the revelation he recorded in the Torah. See *Pirkei Avoth* 1:1 for how Judaism saw the succession and transmission of oral law. Conservative and Reform Judaism believe that oral law was a system that developed over time; not necessarily that it was a revelation to Moses at Sinai. Though many in Conservative and Reform Judaism consider oral law as authoritative, others (especially in Reform Judaism) see no problem with adopting their own interpretations and dictums. See “Oral Torah,” *Wikipedia*, http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wik/Oral_Torah (accessed September 11, 2014). Please also note the sources used for the article (even if you dislike Wikipedia). As far as Jesus was concerned, some (not necessarily all) of these oral traditions were wrong interpretations of the written text, and some were direct violations of what the written text taught. These were the precepts and the traditions of men that made the Word void (see Mark 7:1-13).

and many other such things you do.” He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and your mother’; and, ‘He who curses father or mother, let him be put to death.’ But you say, ‘If a man says to his father or mother, “Whatever profit you might have received from me is Corban”—’ (that is, a gift to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or his mother, making the word of God of no effect through your tradition which you have handed down. And many such things you do” (Mark 7:6-13 NKJV).

Tradition had taken the place of the Word of God! Jewish leaders esteemed men’s ideas and theories above God’s Word. Even worse, they rejected God’s commands in order to hold fast to their tradition (and sometimes, to be politically correct).

Similar things are happening in churches today. Many leaders have quit preaching the Bible. The fluff and psychology of the world has substituted scriptural teaching and vocabulary to such an extent that pulpit messages no longer echo the New Testament or bear any likeness to Jesus or His messages!

What was (and is) the outcome of religious tradition and the rejection of God’s commandments? *God’s Word is made void.* The Jews whom Jesus reprimanded lived in doubt, unbelief (rebellion), unfaithfulness, and powerlessness. With rare exceptions, their religion was lifeless and unable to bring deliverance.

But God intended them to enjoy power-filled and anointed lives! Clearly, these works of the law helped no one. They were precisely what Paul and the early Church valiantly opposed. They were works in opposition to or in place of God’s Word!

Paul’s stance should inform ours. We must stand against traditions that rob us (or anyone) of His grace and blessings, and of precious intimacy with Him. Such works prevent our entry into powerful relationship-fellowship with Him. It steals the very manifestation of God’s holy presence and power so essential to victorious living.

Overview: Ceremonial Laws Opposed by Paul

As we have seen, Paul disapproved of Gentiles keeping of ceremonial laws in an attempt to earn God's grace (which comes only through Jesus). Paul's passion to right this wrong is evident in his words: "Christ has become nothing to any of you who are seeking acceptance with God through the Law: you have fallen away from grace" (Gal. 5:4 WNT).

Before we shed new light on this issue, let's hit some quick points:

- Jewish followers of Jesus pressured Gentile converts, *as a prerequisite for salvation*, to keep laws meant only for Israel.
- Paul publicly opposed Peter and Jewish believers with him (see Gal. 2), by asserting that God did not demand ceremonial law-keeping by Gentile converts.
- After a heated debate at the Jerusalem Council (see Acts 15:1-30), Paul convinced his peers that circumcision, Temple worship, and the laws and rituals associated with them were not to be imposed upon Gentile converts.¹⁵⁴ They were to trust Jesus' sacrifice as the way into the presence and blessing of God.
- Peter also testified of how the Lord first visited the Gentiles by sending Peter to Cornelius' house (see Acts 10). Galatians 2:11-13 reveals that Peter abandoned the argument for which Paul had rebuked him. In the course of the council, Paul, Peter, and Barnabas were unified in refuting Judaizing.
- James, the leader of the church at Jerusalem, agreed. The council's conclusions were published in a letter sent to all the Gentile converts. Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas were sent to read the letter and confirm it.

¹⁵⁴ Acts 15:5 is the key to understanding what the Pharisee believers wanted the Gentile converts to do. They wanted them to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses. In Acts 15:28-29, we find that, with two exceptions (the dietary/ceremonial commands not to eat blood or things strangled), the Gentiles were not required to observe any ritual commandments, but only moral ones. The two negative moral commands mentioned (against idolatry and fornication) well summarize a huge portion of the moral commands. Paul teaches in his epistles *many* moral commands, ordinances, and injunctions not included under the general headings of idolatry or fornication.

The book of Galatians is a mighty testimony of how this controversy was resolved. Gentile converts were released from the Judaizers' demands and embraced Jesus and His sacrifice as their way of salvation.¹⁵⁵

Now let's approach specific ceremonial laws in the light of Christ.

Circumcision

By now, it is clear that the Levitical priesthood, Temple worship, and other ceremonial laws were given only to Israel. Circumcision was for Abraham and his natural descendants.¹⁵⁶ Jewish men were required to serve and love God from the heart; this was a pre-Calvary form of heart circumcision.¹⁵⁷

Our circumcision in Christ is in the spirit (in the heart).¹⁵⁸ We enter our new and greater covenant by way of Jesus only (see Heb. 8:6), not via male circumcision. Let all the men say, "Amen and thank You, Jesus!"

The circumcision issue is important. True conversion to Judaism requires that a cut be made, even for those previously circumcised as a medical practice. Christian men rarely take this route, but in some quarters this unscriptural idea is embraced. I doubt they understand that circumcision and a full conversion to Judaism say, in effect, that they no longer need Jesus or His sacrifice.

Please allow the weight of the past statement to sink in. It is precisely the point Paul drove home in Galatians 5:3-4:

*And I testify again to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. **You who are trying to be declared righteous by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace!** (NET)*

Don't take verse four out of context, as many have done. The discussion concerned being coerced into circumcision and into keeping the Law of Moses as the means of

¹⁵⁵ See Romans 3:21-22, 28; Hebrews chapters 8, 9, and 10.

¹⁵⁶ See Genesis 17:9-10.

¹⁵⁷ See Deuteronomy 10:16; 30:6.

¹⁵⁸ See Romans 2:23-29; Colossians 2:11.

salvation in Christ. This was not and never will be God's way of salvation! God's great grace came freely through the sacrifice of Christ for us.

Feasts, Festivals, and the Synagogue

Gentiles sometimes participated in the feasts and festivals given to Israel and its generations. They had great respect and honor for God and His covenant people, but they came *voluntarily*. Historically, some Gentiles joined themselves to Israel in worshipping the One true God. Some even participated in the synagogues.

These Gentiles were called "God-fearers." Cornelius was one of several mentioned in the New Testament.¹⁵⁹ These believers participated, but never took on full covenant responsibilities through circumcision. Therefore, their level of participation was restricted.

Even today, Jewish rabbis rarely demand actual conversion from Gentiles who choose to participate in Jewish activities. Exceptions to this are rare, although Jews do frown upon Gentile participation during the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). Requirements of each synagogue differ depending upon their adherence to Orthodox, Chasidic, Conservative, or Reform theologies (the most liberal in this respect being the Reform synagogues).

During the 1990s, I participated in the services of a small Jewish Reform synagogue and studied Hebrew with their Israeli language teachers for about two years. What a great learning experience in Judaism and the Hebrew Scriptures! However, I was never pressured to be circumcised or to convert to Judaism. The rabbi knew my background in Christian ministry and never asked me to convert.

This attitude is appropriate and stands in stark contrast to that of the Judaizers of Paul's day. Their intolerable error must be opposed whenever and wherever it rears its head, which it does from time to time.

The Sabbath and Dietary Laws

¹⁵⁹ See Acts 10:2, 22.

There is nothing new to share here about the Sabbath, but this bears repeating: the Sabbath law was specifically for the nation of Israel (see Exod. 31:16-17). Christians are not to be judged according to laws concerning Sabbaths or the dietary laws of Israel (with the exception of the Christian requirement not to eat blood, animals that were strangled, or food sacrificed to idols.¹⁶⁰)

Prayer Shawls, Tassels, and Phylacteries

The use of prayer shawls, tassels,¹⁶¹ and phylacteries¹⁶² was never commanded for those outside of Israel. Jesus undoubtedly wore them because He was born a Jew and observed Jewish law by faith-faithfulness.¹⁶³ That does not mean that we must follow these requirements. There is no reason for Christians to believe that they must wear these items in order to pray.

On the other hand, I will not judge Christians who find some merit in using them. Neither the use nor disuse of these items is any indicator of spirituality. We simply must remember that the teaching of Paul and the conclusions reached by the Jerusalem Council still apply to those not born of the stock of Israel and adhering to Judaism.

Grace Upon Grace

Romans 11:17-24 calls us the wild olive branches that “contrary to nature” (vs. 24) have been grafted into the olive tree (Israel) and are receiving its nourishment. Being nourished by the tree does not warrant the making of assumptions or additions to these verses. Some do that by stating that Christians should be more in tune with their Jewish or Hebrew roots by observing feasts, festivals, Sabbaths, and the use of Jewish ritual items such as phylacteries, prayer shawls, and even mezuzahs.¹⁶⁴ I disagree if these are

160 See Acts 15:29. Please study again Romans 14:1-23; Colossians 2:16-17; and Galatians 4:9-10. These verses make this truth crystal clear.

161 *Tallitot* and *tzitziyot*—see Numbers 15:38; Deuteronomy 22:12. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 15:743-44, s.v. “tallit.”

162 *Tefillin*—Exodus 13:9; Deuteronomy 6:8; 11:18. See *Jesus and His Times*, p. 150-151; and *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 15:898-904, s.v. “tefillin.”

163 See Romans 15:8-13. Also note that, without disclosing His nationality to the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus was recognizable as a Jew (see John 4:9). His dress made it obvious; Jesus wore tassels and phylacteries. The woman healed of the issue of blood touched the fringes of His robe. The Greek word is *kraspedon* (see Luke 8:44). This is the same word found in the LXX (Septuagint) in Numbers 15:38-39 and Deuteronomy 22:12, which commanded Israelites to wear tassels on the corners of their garments. See *Hatch and Redpath*, p. 782a, *κρᾶσπεδον*.

164 The mezuzah is a small container, usually ornate, that contains a scroll of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21. The mezuzah is placed on the right side of the door (doorpost or doorframe) at about shoulder height. It is usually slightly slanted toward the entrance of the door. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 11:1474-1477, s.v.

“mezuzah.”

imposed on Christians as necessary! These verses do not insinuate such things. Don't let confused people complicate this for you! It is really very easy to understand.

God made provision for the world through the awesome sacrifice of Jesus. This redemption was never before available. No ceremonial observances were required to receive it. Jesus simply became our substitute. That, my brother and sister, is grace beyond all grace—specifically, the fact that Jesus died in our place and redeemed us.

He paid for something we could never, *ever* earn! It is God's free gift of abundant grace that must now be received by all (see Rom. 5:17). It does not fall on people like coconuts dropping from palm trees. Nor does it fall on people because they are "nice." We first of all lay hold of the grace of salvation by our trust in the sacrifice and our commitment to the Lordship of Jesus in our lives; then we walk and live in God's great grace by continued trust, commitment, obedience, loyalty, and faithfulness to Him.¹⁶⁵

This is "grace upon grace," as recorded in many translations, or an "ever increasing grace" as Liddell and Scott state it (see John 1:16).¹⁶⁶ Grace was not "original" to the New Covenant.¹⁶⁷ God gave grace to the people in the Bible *before* Jesus came and died for us. The grace resulting from what Jesus did was added on top of this earlier, quite wonderful grace. We need not argue "bad or no grace" versus "good grace." We have received *grace upon grace*—immeasurable riches poured on top of the grace already given.

Through the same kind of faith-faithfulness that Abraham demonstrated long before Christ's sacrifice, we can now access this added grace. Our faith-faithfulness, trust, and commitment to Jesus as our Lord brings us into the powerful, all-inclusive salvation He purchased on our behalf, through His blood.¹⁶⁸

There is nothing more wonderful to be desired or sought!

165 As I wrote previously, the words *faith* and *believe* mean this from the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew meanings are what stood behind Paul's Greek quotations from the Septuagint. See Chapter 4—the section titled "The Scriptural Argument" for further study on the Greek and Hebrew words. It is vital information.

166 See Liddell and Scott, *avri*, 5, 153a for the word usually translated "upon."

167 See, for example, Exodus 33:19; 34:6; Numbers 6:25; Psalms 5:7; 84:11; 123:2; Proverbs 3:22, 34; and Micah 7:18.

168 See Romans 4:12–5:2; Ephesians 2:8; Romans 3:24–26.

The Missing Ingredient: Holiness

On some fronts the Church is seeing the greatest revival in years. On others it is lapsing into the most debased rejection of God’s moral commandments in recent history. As headlines expose high-profile misuses of church funds for personal and unseemly gain and as professing ministers of the gospel pursue career sidelines that flaunt ungodly sexuality and other worldly themes, I weep for the Church of Jesus Christ and the holy example it is supposed to set.

We are commanded to “come out from among them and be...separate” (2 Cor. 6:17 KJV). We are in this world but Paul commanded us not to be conformed to it (see Rom. 12:2). Too many churches are preaching user-friendly “gospels,” attempting to evangelize the world with the world’s ideas. This is darkness and deception, and it reveals the dire condition of some quarters in the Body of Christ.

Fallen pastors, devastated congregations, adultery, homosexual forays, prostitution, child molestation, embezzlement, and cover-ups—so many who lived in the darkness of denial have been yanked into the harsh light of reality.

I have personally witnessed “Christian” businesses overcharging churches they thought had money to spare. Have you seen Christians lie about their finances to their churches in order to scam money from charitable programs? I have. Or people sharing “revelations” about get-rich-quick schemes? I have seen that, too, and the only revelation turned out to be a prison term.

I could go on, but I won’t. None of this reflects the true grace of the true gospel.

Find the Cause; Preach the Cure

What is happening to the Church and to so many leaders? And what do we expect to happen in the pews when Satan’s deceptions infiltrate the leadership? Sooner or later, the congregation will be infected, too. Lawlessness in the laity is inevitable unless there is repentance and drastic change at the leadership level.

When the leadership at Thyatira allowed the teachings and evil practices of the false prophetess Jezebel to continue, a great seduction overtook the church (see Rev. 2:20-23). The servants of God were drawn into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. The people in the pews were harmed because sin was accommodated in the pulpit.

Such sin disgraces the cause of Christ. No-nonsense repentance must follow!

This is why we must discuss the Church's dirty laundry. It is not to condemn these poor folks or to sit in judgment over them. No. They are condemning themselves with their actions. Restoration from the Father is available, but there must always be repentance and sometimes even restitution made. When sin is unleashed, consequences are inevitable. Even those who genuinely repent can suffer public humiliation and mockery. Some even go to prison.

With the proliferation of unholy acts in the Body of Christ, we must reexamine what we are teaching and preaching. We *must* be sure we are following the pattern of sound New Testament doctrine in the words of Jesus and the apostles.¹⁶⁹

The gospel is a call to repentance that turns people “from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God...” (Acts 26:18 KJV). The true gospel confronts realms of sin and darkness. Jesus did not come to say, “You’re OK and I’m OK.” That is a perversion of His gospel. The Holy Spirit convicts the world of sin; He doesn’t lead anyone to accept or tolerate it. He also convicts of righteousness (what is right according to God’s commandments), and the judgment of God.

Jesus did not embrace the world’s ungodliness; He taught repentance from it. His teaching and preaching, and that of His first disciples, would have offended many of today’s believers! Why? Because Jesus’ message was politically and religiously incorrect!¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ See Second Timothy 3:16-17; 4:2-4; First Timothy 6:3-4.

¹⁷⁰ In support of this paragraph, see Acts 26:17-18; Second Corinthians 4:1-6; John 16:7-11; Luke 5:32; 24:47; Matthew 4:17; 11:20-24; Mark 1:14-15; 6:12; Luke 13:1-5.

The Holy Spirit convinces me from the Scripture that we are seeing a great falling away from the truths of the gospel, and a great “falling for” a substitute message—a worldly, trendy, and fashionable message that assuages the world and its ways, never calling its hearers to repentance, remorse, or accountability. And yes, it is making its way into our churches.

Many churches are straying from the truth and becoming politically and religiously correct. Desiring to become acceptable to society, they are becoming unacceptable before God. These developments cause abundant ungodliness, loose moral principles, and a severe lack of spiritual power. Many churches have substituted God’s wonderful presence with special events and costly productions, and in some cases, a circus-like atmosphere. High-end technology, worldly marketing schemes, and good “branding” might be “good business,” but they have no power from heaven!

Where are the church services in which people are saved, baptized in the Holy Spirit, healed, delivered from demons, and taught God’s uncompromised Word, as was done in the book of Acts? Where is the daily devotion and consecration to God as was evident in first-century believers?

Without God’s mighty presence in Christian services, churches are dead or dying, reduced to mere social clubs staging entertainment experiences. Where the people once moved in God’s supernatural power, its public demonstration has disappeared. Sinners can sit in these churches without feeling remorse or conviction for their sin. Instead, they leave service feeling good about their lifestyles.

Where is the spiritual hunger that swept through previous generations and caused sinners to tremble and run to the altar in repentance? Where are the revivals that caused bars and prostitution halls to close because demand dried up?

They are coming! God is raising churches and ministries around the world that have a zeal for the Lord and are walking in the manifested anointing of the Holy Spirit.

Is the whole Church ready to meet the Lord? No. But with an unprecedented outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that can change quickly. I believe such a move is on the

horizon. But I also believe that if the Lord came today, the spiritual decay in so many churches would bring the following manifestation:

Many will say to Me on that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:22-23 NASB).

Why are churches in such a state? What are they lacking?

The missing ingredient that stands out above all the rest is holiness. For many in Christendom, looking and acting like the world is priority one, while living a holy life is a back-burner issue. This is true far too often these days.

That is not the final word, however. God is raising a fired-up generation that is sold out to Jesus and His message. These mighty, Holy-Spirit-empowered believers refuse to conform to the world's norms. They choose to walk in uncompromising holiness and purity, with God's zeal burning in their hearts and His glory permeating their lives.

God is bringing up His faithful ones all over the planet. Are you ready? He wants us to carry His mighty presence to a lost and dying world!

Holiness: God's Heartbeat for Humanity

The subject of holiness is found throughout the Bible and cannot be overemphasized. Hundreds of verses mention it, explain it, and warn against what is unholy. Holiness is at the heart of God's desire for humankind.

I have counted roughly 650 times that words for *holiness*, *holy*, *holiest*, *sanctified*, and *sanctify* are used in the Bible. If 650 mentions don't make holiness a central Bible theme, I don't know what does!

Did you know that holiness is beautiful according to God's Word? From the beginning, God's family was to fellowship with Him in the beauty of His holiness. There is magnificence in holiness that is unsurpassed in the human experience. If God and the Lord Jesus are at work in our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, we experience daily measures of the absolutely awesome presence of the Holy God.

Scripture speaks of the beauty of holiness:

*Give unto the LORD the glory due unto his name: bring an offering, and come before him: worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness (1 Chronicles 16:29 KJV).*¹⁷¹

Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness: fear before him, all the earth (Psalms 96:9 KJV).

Nothing compares to His presence. But His presence does not bless unless we are walking in His holiness (by faith and obedience to His Word). It begins by giving the honor and respect due to His Name. It continues by bringing the Lord an offering as worship to Him. True worship can only be a reality in holiness and the fear of the Lord.

Some believe they can live sloppy Christian lives and yet come to church and mix their worship to the Lord with a perverse lifestyle. That will never work! Have you ever heard of sounding brass and tinkling cymbals? (See First Corinthians 13:1 KJV.) That is what Scripture calls the exercise of spiritual gifts in the absence of love. Obedience to the Lord and His commandments demonstrates our love for Him. What is our worship without obedience to the Lord? It is a loveless worship that is not pleasing to the Lord. When our lives are full of sin, our worship is stripped of the beauty of holiness and becomes meaningless noise. God is glorified when those who fear Him worship him!

Holiness is not a side issue. The following truths emphasize its importance:

1. God is a holy God, and His people are to be a holy people (see Isa. 6:3; 1 Pet. 2:9).
2. God's presence is a holy presence, and His Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Just as He is the Spirit of holiness, He is the Spirit of grace (see Heb. 10:29; Zech. 12:10; Rom. 1:4). It is important to note that He is called the Spirit of grace twice and the *Holy* Spirit ninety-two times! The latter is His most emphasized designation in Scripture.

¹⁷¹ See also Second Chronicles 20:21; Psalms 29:2.

3. We serve a holy Lord Jesus (see Rev. 3:7; Acts 2:27; 3:14; 4:30). He is the holy Lamb of God and the holy Son of the holy Father (see John 17:11; Rev. 4:8; 15:4; 16:5).
4. Even demons recognized Jesus as the Holy One of God (see Luke 4:34; Mark 1:24).
5. The covenant is holy (see Luke 1:72). All of God's covenants are holy to Him, and should be holy to us.
6. The angels of God are holy (see Luke 9:26).
7. The prophets who spoke by the Lord were holy (see Luke 1:70).
8. His Name is holy (see Luke 1:49; Lev. 20:3).
9. The priests of God in Israel were to be holy or set apart (see Lev. 21:6-7; Exod. 35:19).
10. The feasts of Israel were to be holy (see Lev. 23:37).
11. The sacrifices that the priests offered were holy (see Lev. 2:3, 10; 6:25; 7:1; 10:12, 17; 14:13).
12. The priestly garments were holy (see Lev. 16:4, 32).
13. The sanctuary of God was to be holy (see Lev. 16:33; Exod. 39:1).
14. An important task of the priesthood was to separate (or distinguish) between the holy and unholy, and the clean and the unclean! (See Leviticus 10:10; 11:47; 20:25-26.)

Discerning the Holy and the Unholy

Distinguishing between the holy and the unholy is important to God. When His priests failed to discern the difference, God rebuked them:

Your priests violate my teachings and dishonor my holy things. They don't distinguish between what is holy and what is unholy. They don't teach the difference between what is clean and what is unclean... (Ezekiel 22:26 GW).

We are a royal and holy priesthood (see 1 Pet. 2:9), although many have forgotten this essential part of our calling in God. Unfortunately, the absence of this truth in teaching leads to the failure to distinguish between what is or is not holy. Instead of being honored, God's holy requirements are often battered. This essential part of our calling must be revived in the Church! We must be taught to distinguish and differentiate; but messages from pulpits have increasingly gotten away from such emphases!

The saints are to persevere in keeping God's commandments and their faithfulness in Jesus (see Rev. 14:12). Holy living is intimately connected to both and critical to our loyalty and devotion before Him. Saints are supposed to be holy—and being holy means being able to recognize holiness!

The Greek word for *saints* is from the same word translated “holy” in the New Testament. When referring to God's people the word is not a noun but an adjective that describes lifestyle (not just legal, covenant status). Therefore, it does not describe an eternal state unchanged by ungodly practices. An amplified translation of *saints* could read this way: “those living set-apart lives in holiness, the lives to which God called them after He cleansed them through Jesus and gave them *His* holiness.”

That is a mouthful, and it should adjust our thinking. Instead of being a “name tag,” holiness describes a lifestyle. So, if we were sanctified (made holy, separated, and consecrated) when we received Jesus as Savior and Lord, then we should now be living demonstrations of what God did for us (see 1 Cor. 1:2). Our calling is to be saints—people whose living is holy. This was Peter's teaching in First Peter 1:14-19. I urge you to study the passage!

Our fourteen-point list summarized major parts of the holiness equation. A well-known Bible account illustrates it. In it Isaiah describes the activity around God's throne. Among the details is this one: “One [seraphim] called to another, and said, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts! The whole earth is full of his glory!’” (Isa. 6:3).

The Hebrew word translated “holy” in this verse is *kadosh*. It means to be sacred, both ceremonially and morally. It also indicates someone or something that is selected,

pure, holy, consecrated, and pious. In one of its other forms, the word refers to the sanctuary of God as being holy.¹⁷²

God is holy and we are called to be holy, as was Israel, of whom God said: “You shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:6a WEB). Israel was God’s special people dedicated to His service. Their relationship to the holy God is what made them holy, as His words confirm: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own” (Lev. 20:26 NIV).

Keeping themselves separate from anything unholy, including other nations, was one of the conditions under which God would be pleased with Israel. They were set apart by Him from the ungodliness and perversion of the world; this is what ensured holiness.

Holiness and Separation

Please hear this with your heart and you will see that this is exactly what Peter and Paul taught concerning the royal priesthood and holy nation (in Christ) who are to be separated from unequal yokes, unrighteousness, darkness, the devil (Belial), the disbelieving (untrustworthy, unfaithful, without trust in God), idols, and the unclean.¹⁷³

The earlier instructions to Israel should inform our conduct:

But you shall deal with them like this: you shall break down their altars, and dash their pillars in pieces, and cut down their Asherim [false gods], and burn their engraved images with fire. For you are a holy people to the LORD your God: the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, above all peoples who are on the face of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:5-6).

This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and ordinances: you shall therefore keep and do them with all your heart, and with all your soul. You have declared the LORD this day to be your God, and that you would walk in his ways, and keep his statutes, and his

172 See *Key Word Study Bible* under the Hebrew word “holy” in their dictionary coded to Strong’s H6942; BDB 871-873. See also HALOT under שקד for a more complete treatment of the subject.

173 See First Peter 1:15-16; 2:9; Second Corinthians 6:14-18.

commandments, and his ordinances, and listen to his voice: and the LORD has declared you this day to be a people for his own possession, as he has promised you, and that you should keep all his commandments; and to make you high above all nations that he has made, in praise, and in name, and in honor; and that you may be a holy people to the LORD your God, as he has spoken (Deuteronomy 26:16-19).

To walk in holiness before God, Israel was to separate from idols and be intolerant of the world's idolatry. This would be considered religiously and politically incorrect today; but we must see all idolatry as being completely against God and His commandments. We are not to associate with people who worship idols and false gods, except to reveal Christ to them. God commanded Israel to destroy all idols whenever they entered a land.

In the United States, some devil worshippers and idolaters live in almost every city. Many people think it is all right to tolerate the idea of many religions and ways to God. Secular law requires us to let people worship as they choose, but our job is to minister and preach the truth so they come out of darkness into His marvelous light, and from the kingdom of the devil, into the kingdom of God (see Acts 26:18).

In order for Israel to take their place as a holy nation, they were to do follow God with their whole heart and soul, meaning the commandments would be obeyed from a heart of obedience. This shows that keeping His Word *must* start inside, but be carried out externally through our actions of obedience (see James 1:22).

Some teach that Old Covenant holiness was based on the people's obedience to the law, but New Covenant holiness is based on the obedience of Jesus alone, thus implying that little or nothing is required in the areas of holiness and obedience. The idea is twisted, because it ultimately causes people to minimize and finally abandon these requirements. The substitution of Christ's eternal sacrifice for our sin is the grace message of the cross. It is a blatant distortion to presume that the Lord's substitutionary sacrifice replaces holiness and obedience to God's commandments. No! We live in obedience and holiness to honor Him who died in our place! We respect the blood of Jesus and we honor His Father, who gave Him for us. This moves us to obey and live holy.

We have seen scriptural references to obedience in many verses. The sacrifice of Jesus did not replace the believer's practice of holiness. No! Because He was obedient, we are to be obedient. Because He was holy, we are to live holy. Because He did only His Father's will, we are to understand and do the Father's will.¹⁷⁴

We are to imitate Jesus. That is true discipleship!¹⁷⁵

Falling Short of God's Grace

Under the new provisions of God's grace, holiness is more important than ever. We are in a stricter walk than any Israelite under the law. This is contrary to most teaching today, and many think it is an exaggeration. It is not. It may even be an understatement, as we will see.

Let's begin in the book of Hebrews:

Follow after peace with all men, and sanctification [consecration, holiness] without which no man will see the Lord, looking carefully lest there be any man who falls short of the grace of God (Hebrews 12:14-15a WEB).

Those who pervert and fall short of the true grace of God are found in these verses. In the second half of verse 15, the anointed writer of Hebrews reveals what it means to fall short of God's grace. It says: "Lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you..." (WEB).

Bitterness was mentioned in Acts 8:23 when Peter spoke to a new convert named Simon. Before his conversion, Simon was a proponent of witchcraft, sorcery, and an ungodly lifestyle. After coming to Christ, Simon allowed some evil things back into his heart.

Peter perceived in Simon the gall of bitterness and connected it to iniquity. Bitterness here means more than we commonly realize; it refers to a "bitter hatred" and "extreme

¹⁷⁴ See John 6:38; Ephesians 5:17; Colossians 1:9-10.

¹⁷⁵ See First John 2:6; Ephesians 5:1; John 14:12; 8:31-32.

wickedness.”¹⁷⁶ These are contrary to true grace, and those who practice them fall short of God’s grace just as Simon did. Although he repented, he fell short of God’s grace in allowing his heart to get into the condition Peter identified.

The apostle Paul said that bitterness is something Christians must be alert to and avoid (see Eph. 4:31). It not only causes trouble to those who entertain it, but “*many be defiled by it...*” (Heb. 12:15b WEB). Being defiled also means falling short of the grace of God. It means to pollute, stain, sully, soil, contaminate, or to defile with sins, as in one who has been dyed another color!¹⁷⁷ What was once white by the washing of the blood is now dyed in darkness.¹⁷⁸ Whatever (or whoever) is defiled becomes profane, as the example of Esau shows: “lest there be any sexually immoral person, or profane person, like Esau, who sold his birthright for one meal” (Heb. 12:16 WEB).

Bitterness, defilement, sexual immorality and being profane violate God’s moral commandments and cause believers to fall short of the grace of God. It behooves us to learn from the failings of others and to remember the nature and might of the God we serve:

For you know that even when he [Esau] afterward desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for a change of mind though he sought it diligently with tears. For you have not come to something that might be touched, and that burned with fire, and darkness, gloom, and storm, the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which those who heard it begged that not one more word should be spoken to them, for they could not stand that which was commanded, “If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned;” and so fearful was the appearance, that Moses said, “I am terrified and trembling.” But you have come to Mount Zion, and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable multitudes of angels, to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits

¹⁷⁶ In the Greek, *pikria*—Thayer’s Greek-English Lexicon coded to Strong’s G4088.

¹⁷⁷ See Strong’s and Thayer’s G3392.

¹⁷⁸ In the Greek, *miaino*—Thayer’s 414a; Strong’s G3392; TDNT 4:644, 593; BAGD 520d.

of just men made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a New Covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling that speaks better than that of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who speaks. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned on the Earth, how much more will we not escape who turn away from him who warns from heaven, whose voice shook the earth then, but now he has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heavens." This phrase, "Yet once more," signifies the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that have been made, that those things which are not shaken may remain. So since we are receiving a Kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks, through which we may offer service pleasing to God, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:17-29).

I quoted this lengthy passage for a reason. The New Covenant mediated through Jesus Christ is far more powerful than what happened between God and Israel on Mount Sinai. Even the fire and fearful appearance of God's descent on that mountain cannot compare to the glory of the heavenly in the blood of the New Covenant through the Lord Jesus. There is no escape from Him who speaks from heaven. The earth can be shaken, but the kingdom we have received is unshakable.

Holiness, the Christian's "Birthmark"

The New Covenant in the blood of Jesus therefore demands greater awe, respect, honor, and reverential fear than was ever demanded from the children of Israel. That is the kind of grace the writer of Hebrews calls us to have. It is not some weak, cotton-candy message that twists the true grace of God by rejecting the greater responsibilities of our covenant in Jesus' blood. The grace we receive is the grace to abide by our greater and more powerful calling. Through true grace, we can walk in degrees of holiness and purity that were unattainable before Jesus became our sacrifice.

Because we are now the temple of the living God and can glorify Him in both spirit and body, we must flee from all immorality of any kind! (See First Corinthians 6:15-20.) Keeping the holy, righteous, spiritual, and moral commandments of God is how we glorify Him. For example, we must accept the command to "Flee sexual immorality" (1

Cor. 6:18 NKJV), instead of following the false belief that, because our future sins are already forgiven, we are free from sin *even if* we commit fornication.

So is holiness rigid, harsh, or hard? Is it for those under the law and not for those under grace? Some believe holiness *is* law and, as such, is unnecessary for Christians under grace. Holiness is not based on the Law of Moses but on God who is holy; therefore, it applies to those under grace. The verses we studied from Hebrews 12 support this statement; the passage began with holiness and consecration to the Lord, and the fact that those who defile themselves through sin and iniquity fall short of God's grace.

The holiness I describe is never burdensome, by the way; and it is not "works." It is a powerfully liberating and wonderfully divine part of the new creation in Christ. Every believer is called to live holy in this world (see Eph. 4:17-32, 1 Thess. 4:1-8). It is one of the great secrets to a power-filled life and a living faith-faithfulness.

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. His commandments are not grievous [severe, stern, cruel, unsparring, burdensome] (1 John 5:2-3).

Holiness is foundational to the Christian life and is linked to love. It is the anointed lifestyle that has God's seal of approval. It is one of the "birthmarks" of the Christian who is known by God.

However God's firm foundation stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let every one who names the name of the Lord depart from unrighteousness."¹⁷⁹ Now in a large house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of clay. Some are for honor, and some for dishonor. If anyone therefore purges himself from these, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, and suitable for the master's use, prepared for every good work. Flee from youthful lusts; but

¹⁷⁹ Unrighteousness can be defined as: wickedness, injustice of heart *and* life, anything that violates law and justice (His holy commandments), an act of unrighteousness.

pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart (2 Timothy 2:19-22).

The God who knows His own requires certain things of them. He has called believers in Christ to be vessels of honor exalting Him and His holiness. The following list of requirements should be obvious, yet they often go unrecognized. As vessels of honor, however, we must own our responsibilities and be aware of the mandates of our position. It requires that:

1. We depart from unrighteousness.
2. We purge ourselves from the sin that so easily besets us (see Heb. 12:1).
3. We pursue righteousness (God's idea of what is right).
4. We pursue faith-faithfulness and loyalty to God.
5. We pursue love, the sum total of God's holy commandments.
6. We pursue peace (wholeness and completeness) in Christ.
7. We call upon the Lord from a pure heart.

Depart, purge, and pursue because these lead to calling on the Lord from a pure heart. That will preach!

Pursuing Righteousness to the Finish Line

In the very moment we received Jesus as the Lord of our lives, we were given the free gift of righteousness. Instantly, His blood made us pure before Him. (See Romans 5:17; 3:22-26). These are vital truths. However, if you read no further in Romans, you will miss one half of the righteousness equation. The other side is the call to *live in* righteousness on a daily basis. (Paul discusses this at length in Romans 6:12-23.)

Unless believers live this way, the practice of sin will encroach upon them and move them from righteousness back to unrighteousness.¹⁸⁰ Some in Christendom claim that once you are righteous, you are always righteous, regardless of the unrighteousness you practice, because God looks only at the heart and not the "sins of the flesh."

180 I recommend an excellent study: First John 3:7-10 (NASB); First Corinthians 10:1-12; Jude 3-16; and a "bonus": Second Peter 2.

However, according to Jesus, all sin is birthed in the heart before it is practiced on the outside (in the flesh). He said: “Out of the heart come evil ideas, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are the things that defile a person” (Matt. 15:19-20a NET).

Either we believe Jesus’ assessment of the human heart or we discredit it. James taught the same thing (see James 1:4-15). This is why Paul said that there are times we have to cleanse ourselves of filthiness in our spirits (see 2 Cor. 7:1). Sin in the flesh begins by yielding to it, conceiving it in the heart, and then acting upon it. This is why Jesus taught that a man commits adultery in his heart when he looks upon a woman to lust after her (see Matt. 5:27- 28).

Proverbs teaches us to watch over our hearts with all diligence because the issues of life flow from it (see Prov. 4:23). We have to watch what is happening inside us. If it does not line up with God’s Word or His commandments, we must throw it out!

Jesus referred to people who at one time were righteous and walked in the miraculous (see Matt. 7:21-23). They cast out demons and performed miracles in the name of Jesus. Was He saying that ungodly people walked in the miraculous? Not according to the book of Acts. The people who performed miracles were once holy people. In Matthew 7:21-23 Jesus mentioned those who later made iniquity their daily routine, until He no longer knew them.

Somebody said it like this: “It is not how you start. It’s how you finish.” Many people start out right, but end up very wrong. Where they end up determines their eternal abode. But many in the modern Church have this backwards. They believe that receiving Jesus as their Lord is all that matters. They are not concerned with how they live after their initial experience with the Savior.

According to Jesus, it is the finish line and not the starting line that matters most. This principle is taught in the prophets, in Jesus’ teaching, and in the epistles. It is a Bible

principle taught in both covenants!¹⁸¹ May these words resonate in people’s hearts and move them into a godly fear of the Lord. It is time for us to quit playing church, and repent!

If righteousness was delivered, signed, and forever sealed in the new birth, and required no holy living afterward, why do Second Timothy 2:22 and First Timothy 6:11 tell us to pursue righteousness? (See also Isaiah 51:1.) Why pursue what you already possess as a permanent reality? What does *pursue* mean? Can we forget righteousness once the Holy Spirit regenerates us? Can we make it into heaven regardless of how we live?

This misunderstanding scorns the fact that righteousness remains our responsibility, even under the New Covenant. Righteousness demands our pursuit (see Titus 2:11-12). Jesus said we are to seek it and to hunger and thirst for it (see Matt. 5:6; 6:33). Does that sound like pursuit to you? It does to me.

Does *pursue* mean sitting on your “blessed assurance”? Nonsense! The word *pursue* means “to run swiftly in order to catch” something, “to seek after eagerly” or “earnestly endeavor to acquire”; it alludes to someone who “runs swiftly to reach the goal.”¹⁸² The Greek word is so strong that it is translated “persecute”¹⁸³ in some places.

Make righteousness the object or target of your “persecution.” Run after it. Make it your goal in all you do and all you are. Make it your pattern and lifestyle! This is what Paul commanded concerning righteousness! This is what completes the righteousness equation. Yes, righteousness *is* a free gift; but we were delivered from sin *to live unto righteousness—outwardly* (see 1 Pet. 2:24).

And we can! Every day, we are to put on the breastplate of righteousness in prayer (see Eph. 6:14). We are commanded to “put on” righteousness—to be clothed in it. So righteousness is an ongoing practice that is internal and external. Righteousness affects

181 See Ezekiel 18 and Matthew 24:45-51. Second Peter 2:15-22 mentions those who were at one time in the right way, but forsook it. Numerous other verses prove this point. The opposite is also possible; one can start very wrong, but repent and do the right thing, and be much better off than those in the first group. Ezekiel 18:21-29 reveals both sides. Jesus also taught this in the parable of the two sons in Matthew 21:28-31.

182 In the Greek, *dioko*—Thayer’s 153c (G1377).

183 Thayer’s 153c; see also, Strong’s G1377.

every nook and cranny of our lives. This is how we wake up to righteousness and avoid sin! (See First Corinthians 15:34.)

“God’s righteousness is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17 HCSB). Here, Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4.¹⁸⁴ Remember Paul’s Hebraic approach to faith: it means more than believing. Faith, to Hebrew speakers, included faithfulness, loyalty, trust, and obedience to God.

This explains the idea that righteousness is revealed from faith to faith. It is impossible to live in righteousness without faith-faithfulness that is devoted to the Lord in doing His holy commandments and His Word. Living in righteousness means practicing it (see 1 John 3:7). God’s commandments are a revelation of His righteousness. As it is written: “My tongue shall speak of thy word: for all thy commandments are righteousness” (Ps. 119:172 KJV).

Another scripture bears witness that righteousness is more than a positional reality in Christ: “Oh that you had heeded My commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea” (Isa. 48:18 NKJV).

Do you want your own idea of righteousness or a revelation of how God sees it? Of course, you want His viewpoint! Then give heed to His commandments. A theology of positional righteousness alone (with no connection to everyday conduct) is a half-baked idea lacking eternal value and disqualified as “legal tender” before God. God’s free gift of righteousness demands the practice of righteousness (see Rom. 5:17; 6:14-20).

Let’s take a closer look at this. The anger of man does not labor, work, work out, or perform¹⁸⁵ the righteousness of God (see James 1:20). But there is a “work” involved with the practice of righteousness, and it is related to our performance. Read the entire first chapter of the epistle of James! He believed that the righteousness we are to perform includes persevering under trial, staying out of sin, being quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger, being doers of the word, looking intently into the law of liberty (God’s

¹⁸⁴ See BDB coded to Strong’s H530—*emunah*, meaning “firmness, steadfastness, fidelity”; see also BDB coded to Strong’s H539—*aman*, the Hebrew root word which never means only to believe. It includes being “faithful...firm...lasting...confirmed, established, sure... reliable.” This is how Paul understood faith; he did not use the word as meaning only to believe, as it is used today in much of Christianity. (Review Chapter 4 of this book for further study on the subject of faith.)

¹⁸⁵ In the Greek, *ergazomai*—Thayer G2038b; TDNT 2:635, 251.

holy commandments or His Word), bridling the tongue, and visiting orphans and widows.¹⁸⁶

The list continues in chapters two through five of James' epistle. James was after a life that reflected God's righteousness. The word is repeated in the book several times, depending upon the version. I heard the Holy Spirit whisper in my heart, "The Christian walk starts in righteousness. It should continue in righteousness. And you should double up on it toward the end!"

No slacking! The more time we spend in Christ, the stronger and more determined we should be in righteousness. We should listen closely to James, the half-brother of Jesus. He observed Jesus growing up at home, and then became a major leader in the kingdom of God. This man had personal insight that the Church desperately needs.

Demonstrated Righteousness

Paul was after what James was after: a seamless, demonstrated righteousness that flowed from pure devotion to God and reflected His true grace:

Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?

(Romans 6:15-16 NASB).

Obedience to God's Word (His commandments) results in demonstrated righteousness. This is the often-overlooked side of righteousness that has to do with obedience.

Romans 6 refutes the unscriptural movement that embraces righteousness as a gift, but rejects it as a way of life (seeing it as "works"). The verses you just read make righteousness *dependent* upon obedience *and* upon receiving it as a free gift. It is not either/or, but both! To focus on internal righteousness and forget about its external manifestation is a theological aberration.

¹⁸⁶ Item 6 is from James 3; the remaining items are from James 1.

Though I have made a distinction between the internal and external sides of righteousness, please understand that I do so only for the purpose of study. In reality, one cannot work without the other. They are two sides of a single coin—intimately connected and inseparable. One cannot be exalted while the other is diminished. Let us never reject one at the expense of the other. Amen!

Paul never separated them. He was, however, serious about the place of righteousness—so serious that he commanded us to present ourselves as its slaves:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness [anomia, in the Greek],¹⁸⁷ resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification (Romans 6:17-19 NASB).

We were not freed from sin in order to be *free to sin*. We were freed from sin in order to become slaves of righteousness. That was God’s purpose for our deliverance in Christ! What is our responsibility? We must present our members (our bodies) to this glorious “enslavement” and not present them to sin and lawlessness. Is this what you are doing right now? Are you looking in the mirror?

Do you remember what we learned about lawlessness? It is the rejection or belittling of God’s law and moral commandments. Instead of presenting our members as slaves to impurity (a rejection of commandments because we see them as unnecessary under grace), we must present them as slaves of righteousness resulting in sanctification.

“Sanctification” is from the same Greek root word translated “holiness.” It means separation to God in holy living, and it refers to purity of life.¹⁸⁸ Notice that *The New*

¹⁸⁷ See Strong’s G458.

¹⁸⁸ See Strong’s G38, *hagiasmos*; TDNT 1:113, 14; BAGD 9a; Thayer’s 6d. Note how it is used in First Thessalonians 4:3-8. Look at this in a few different translations to see how they go back and forth from translating the word holiness or sanctification.

American Standard Bible translates the last word in Romans 6:19 (above) as “sanctification.” Other translations render the word as “holiness,” as two examples show:

So now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness
(NIV).

So now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness
(NKJV).

Romans 6 throws new light on the body as slave to righteousness, and acting in holy conduct. External righteousness and holiness are intimately involved with freedom from sin and death and (lo and behold) eternal life. Romans 6:20-22 (NASB) explains:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life.

This passage blows a gaping hole in teachings that diminish and relegate external holiness and sanctification to “works.” Please, if you have been involved in a teaching like this, *repent!* Get back to God and the Lord Jesus through faith-faithfulness in the blood and through living right according to God’s commandments. These are not mutually exclusive; they go hand in hand. To separate them is to separate God’s order of things and invent your own unholy brand of salvation.

Simply stated, holiness is Christlikeness and godliness is God-like. It is imitating the Father and the Lord Jesus (see Eph. 5:1-2). We cannot imitate them and walk in the world’s unholy ways. Jesus never committed sin (see Heb. 4:15). If we say, “I am a Christ-ian,” it means we are supposed to be *like Christ*. In other words, we are to resist and reject all sin!

Did Jesus ever commit adultery with another rabbi’s wife? Did He break any commandments? Did He covet other people’s money or property? Was He a thief, fornicator, murderer, or sinner in any way? Of course not. Instead, He is our example of holiness and godliness. That is Christlikeness and God-likeness.

Despite the emphasis in some Christian realms, salvation was never a “spirit-only” proposition. We are not to downplay the work of salvation in the mind, will, emotions, body, or in our actions and manner of life.

A Greater Responsibility and Accountability

The Church needs a paradigm shift concerning holiness. To minimize holiness is to minimize the Holy God and His Holy Son and reduce the Spirit of God to something less than holy. This treads on dangerous ground. Yet, some brazenly do it when they teach that godliness for a New Covenant believer is less important than under the Old Covenant. As I have shown, holiness is not less important, but more.

To advance a diminishing role of holiness is to say that it has lost value for Christians. Even worse, saying that holiness is less important under grace gives more honor to the Old Testament and the blood of animals than to the New Covenant written in the holy and precious blood of Jesus. This insults the Holy Spirit of grace and treads underfoot the holy blood by which we were bought.

The writer of Hebrews warned against the cheapening of Jesus’ sacrifice:

If we deliberately sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries. If anyone disregards Moses’ law, he dies without mercy, based on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think one will deserve who has trampled on the Son of God, regarded as profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know the One who has said, Vengeance belongs to Me, I will repay, and again, The Lord will judge His people. It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God! (Hebrews 10:26-31 HCSB)

Here’s what happens when we receive Jesus as Savior and Lord: Immediately, our old sins are washed away by His great sacrifice, which is sealed in His holy blood. If we

sin after having made our commitment to Christ, there is no more sacrifice for sins. Jesus already gave His life for us.

That is not the end of the story, unless we let it be. We can run back to the blood that washed us by repenting and confessing our sins. We then receive His cleansing from all unrighteousness (see 1 John 1:7-9). That is the only way out of the certain death that is the wage of sin (see Rom. 6:23). This is the way back into God's loving arms and great grace!

Did you grasp that the punishment and consequences for sin are more severe for the unrepentant believer in Christ than for the Old Testament faithful? Did you also understand that under the blood of the New Covenant there is for the unrepentant a "terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire about to consume the adversaries"?

I did not write that—it is in the Bible!

The modern grace theology that perverts true grace ignores this eternal fact. If the blood of animals and the covenant based on it was so holy that it demanded severe punishment for those who broke it, what do you suppose will happen to those who tread upon the greatest and holiest sacrifice of all?

It will be a terrible surprise for many who thought they could get away with sin and lawlessness because of grace. I pray that anyone in that state will immediately repent. It is a matter of eternal destiny! Stay out of judgment. Run back in trust, faith-faithfulness, and obedience to the sacrifice of Jesus and His holy blood. It is the only way.

Comparing Hebrews 10:26-31 and the Communion Table

Hebrews 10 has generally been interpreted as pertaining only to the Hebrew Christians who departed from their faith in Christ. But past interpretations have been very narrow. There is a wider application to these verses in something Paul taught. The following words, inspired by the Holy Spirit, can be compared with Hebrews 10: "Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord" (1 Cor. 11:27 NASB).

Have you read that and wondered what it means to take communion unworthily? Did you notice that the phrase “guilty of the body and blood of the Lord” sounds like “trampled on the Son of God and regarded as profane the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified” from Hebrews 10? These are insults to the Spirit of grace!

Paul’s admonition regarding the communion table continues:

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread, and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not discern the body. For this cause many among you are weak and sickly, and not a few sleep [the sleep of an early death]. For if we discerned ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are punished by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world (1 Corinthians 11:28-32).

Notice that both Paul and the writer of Hebrews mention judgment.¹⁸⁹ This proves the connection between these two portions of Scripture. Paul taught that if we don’t judge ourselves of wrongdoing then we will be judged (see 1 Cor. 11:28-32). Two of the purposes of the communion table are self-examination based on the blood and body of the Lord, and the cleansing from unrighteousness His blood provides.

We are to examine and judge ourselves. Both give us a way out of God’s judgment. This is what we do in the presence of the elements of the communion table. The big question is: how and based on what do we judge ourselves so that we are not judged?

The answer has already been mentioned: we judge ourselves based on the perfect purity and holiness of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. However, the context of First Corinthians chapter 11 is very significant. The ten chapters preceding it reveal how we judge ourselves from wrongdoing, and explains what wrongdoing we are to judge.

The progression explains the self-judging that is necessary when we come to the communion table. I have listed the main points below, for your convenience. As you read them, consider the following questions: *Have I judged myself in this area when I come to*

¹⁸⁹ See Hebrews 10:27; First Corinthians 11:29, 31-32.

the communion table? Have I properly discerned the body? Is my spiritual foundation built on the revelation of God through Jesus Christ, or am I on a shaky foundation? Will the fire of temptation and persecution reveal a shaky or a firm foundation? (Compare with First Peter 1:7, and James 1:2-8.¹⁹⁰)

- In chapter 1, we learn what Jesus did for us in the new birth.
- In chapter 2, we learn more about this, plus what the Spirit can do in us. (All judgment of ourselves before the communion table starts on the premise laid out in chapters 1 and 2.)
- Chapter 3 emphasizes spiritual growth and teaches us to avoid factionalism and strife. (Strife is the currency of spiritual babies, and a definite no-no.)
- Chapter 4 reveals the massive importance of unrelenting faithfulness to God. We must each judge our own faithfulness and answer to Him for it.
- Chapters 5 and 6 deal with unrighteous behaviors, sexual sins, and their removal from our midst as a church and individually—because we are the temple of God and His Spirit.
- Chapter 7 instructs on judging ourselves concerning virginity, marriage, divorce, purity in spirit and body, and the keeping of God’s commandments.
- Chapter 8 commands us to stay away from idolatrous practices and things offered as food to idols.

¹⁹⁰ I take First Corinthians 3:11-15 as a revelation of what happens in the here and now as the light of Christ shines on our foundation and the works built on them for the Lord as in Ephesians 5:6-14, and not necessarily as referring to the judgment seat of Christ as in Second Corinthians 5:10. The foundation laid *in our present lives* is Christ and what we build on it are our works according to God. No one can lay the foundation after physical death! It must be in the here and now. The quality of our works will be revealed with fire that comes to test them. There will be no fire in this sense to test the quality of our works in heaven. The fiery trial mentioned in First Peter 1:7 is what tests genuineness. If the works are of poor quality they will be burned up and one will suffer loss. I have been there when I suffered loss because of disobedience or failing to do God’s revealed will to me. I suffered loss when I did things on my own without divine directive or support. My works without God became evident and got burned up when they were shown to be wood, hay, or straw. I was saved as by fire, but missed God. Has that ever happened to you? I have missed Him even attempting do His will. I am not yet perfected! Ask my wife! I was not following Him correctly and it cost me. This has happened in every Christian life to one extent or another. Suffering loss is not a heavenly penalty but an earthly one connected to the curse! There are definite and very scriptural rewards from the Father for our obedience in doing His will (doing good works). We will receive some rewards this side of glory; we will receive others in heaven.

- Chapter 9 brings into perspective our giving to the work of the ministry, the fight against sin and for righteous moral behavior, and staying within the boundaries of God’s moral laws and commandments.
- Chapter 10 explains certain judgments against Israel that serve as examples to us. It also reveals that we cannot partake of the table of demons *and* the table of the Lord.

The first ten chapters of First Corinthians point out the difference between good and evil, and form the basis upon which we must judge ourselves as we partake of the bread and the cup at the table of the Lord.

After First Corinthians 11

After we have judged ourselves (so that we are not judged) and have properly discerned His body and received our cleansing from unrighteousness in His blood, we can come to the gifts, manifestations, and ministries of the Holy Spirit found in First Corinthians chapters 12, 13, and 14. We cannot function properly in these gifts and ministries without undergoing the process of the first eleven chapters. (Many do not emphasize this context. As a result many unbecoming activities are passed off in the name of spiritual manifestations, gifts, and ministries. This ought not to be!)

Once our Christian lifestyle is made steadfast through the progressive revelation of First Corinthians chapters 1 through 14, we come to chapter 15 and the resurrection of God’s people at the coming of the Lord!

The coming of the Lord is good news; but I am revolted by the false notion of grace that lulls believers into thinking that they will never come under judgment for any sins committed after the new birth. According to Paul in First Corinthians 11:28-32, they will come under judgment unless they repent, confess their sins, and run back to the cleansing blood.

The Church has been hoodwinked! This New Covenant is not easier, softer, or more tolerant of sin because of grace. Hebrews chapters 10 and 12, and First Corinthians 11 prove the opposite. Our responsibility and accountability are greater *because of grace*.

We look up to Abraham, David, Samuel, Daniel, and other servants and prophets from Old Testament Scripture. Yet they would have given anything to trade places with us. What God has done through Christ Jesus is so much greater than what they knew. We have received great and precious promises by which we are partakers of the divine nature (see 2 Pet. 1:3-4). Therefore, we are able to escape from the corruption of the world. God did not make His nature available to us so we could sin; He shared it so we would escape the darkness. His divine power has granted us all things that pertain to life and godliness (see 2 Pet. 1:3). We have the help of the Holy Spirit in ways our forbears in the faith did not.

We should respect and embrace the great provisions of our better covenant and promises! (See Hebrews 8:6.)

Holiness, Heart and Body

The holiness and sanctification that begin with the Holy Spirit writing God's commandments in our hearts does not end there. As we have seen, the internal work of holiness is designed to manifest externally. This sanctification process involves discipline that is based in God's love.

It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness (Hebrews 12:7-10 NASB).

Sharing in God's holiness powerfully motivates us to receive the discipline (the "child training") we need as believers. It means partaking of His essence. That is glory and power! The anointing can manifest unhindered through a vessel of holiness.¹⁹¹ The

¹⁹¹ In unholy (profaned, defiled, bitter) vessels, the anointing is hindered.

Father anointed Jesus because He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. Jesus hates *everything* that opposes holiness (see Heb. 1:9).

Holiness is required and demanded of all the people of God, whatever covenant is applied. “Be holy as I am holy” is a command repeated—yes!—in the New Testament.

But just as he who called you is holy, you yourselves also be holy in all of your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy; for I am holy.” If you call on him as Father, who without respect of persons judges according to each man’s work, pass the time of your living as foreigners here in reverent fear... (1 Peter 1:15-17).

There are many references to the command of God for us to be holy as He is holy, including in Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; and 21:8. Do you remember when Jesus said He would reveal the keys of the kingdom to Peter? (See Matthew 16:17-19.) Holiness is one of those kingdom keys, and it was revealed to Peter from the Scripture.

What do you notice about the holiness Peter mentioned? Was it “heart holiness” without external demonstration? No! Peter commanded us (based on God’s commandment) to “be holy in all of your behavior.”

Behavior refers to what you do with and through your body. Look up the Greek word translated “behavior”¹⁹² and let it convince you. Behavior includes your conduct, activity, performance, or manner of life.¹⁹³ This is the external holiness shown in and through our physical being. There is no way to make this purely spiritual or inward. Nor is it meant as a metaphor. Peter is speaking plainly about the holiness that is visible to others.

The Father will justly judge every believer according to his or her work. First Peter 1:15-17 speaks directly to believers in Christ Jesus who call God *Father*. There can be no doubt of Peter’s intended audience. Only believers in Christ know God as *Father*. Peter addressed believers’ lifestyles (ways of living in and using their bodies).

192 In the Greek, *anastrophe*—Thayer’s G391; TDNT 7:715; 1093, BAGD 61c.

193 Jesus taught performance in the parable of the talents (see Matt. 25:14-30). In Acts 26:19-20 Paul summarized his ministry. He taught the Gentiles everywhere he went to “perform works worthy of repentance.” The Greek New Testament says: “ἄξια τῆς μετανοίας ἔργα πράσσοντας.” The last two words, *erga prassontas*, mean to perform, practice, obey, fulfill and observe; works, efforts, labors. See Thayer’s 2041, 4238; BAGD 307, 698. These words are despised, minimized, and almost universally rejected by those teaching false concepts that pervert the true grace of God!

This *behavioral holiness* begins in the heart or spirit, but must be expressed in the body. We will answer to God concerning it, as Peter stated. Paul agreed with Peter, saying: “We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be paid back according to what he has done while in the body, whether good or evil” (2 Cor. 5:10 NET).

We will stand before the judgment seat of Christ concerning what we did in the body, whether good or evil. The idea that we will be judged only by what is in our hearts is a false religious idea with no support in Scripture. This false teaching calls the conduct of our bodies “works,” and claims that grace released us from it.

Really? Then why does Scripture say we will be judged before the judgment seat of Christ?

First Corinthians reveals that holiness is not for the spirit alone but also for the body. “The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be *holy both in body and in spirit*” (1 Cor. 7:34b NKJV). Did you catch that? Holiness is not purely internal. Holiness in body and in spirit cannot be separated. To be holy spiritually is to manifest holiness physically; if not, there is a breach that must be addressed.

We perfect holiness in the reverence or fear of the Lord as we cleanse ourselves of all filthiness of flesh and spirit (see 2 Cor. 7:1). Our bodies *and* our spirits are members of Christ; therefore, Paul says we are to flee fornication! (See First Corinthians 6:13-20.) Both spirit and body have been bought with a price. We now have the first fruits (down-payment) of our redemption, but not the fullness of it. We are not yet in the incorruptible state of spirit or body. Both can still be defiled. The holiness factor is for spirit, soul, and body. As we act in God’s holiness, He gets involved with us supernaturally, strengthening us with His grace so we can continue powerfully in right living.

Notice what Paul said about how we are preserved blameless: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely. May your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess. 5:23 WEB).

This verse is usually quoted out of context to say that our sanctification is completely up to God. But if you back up a couple of verses, Paul refutes this idea, writing: “Test all

things, and hold firmly that which is good. Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thess. 5:21-22 WEB).

Verses 21 and 22 give us important context, yet it is still incomplete. I suggest you begin with Paul’s discussion from First Thessalonians 4:1 (about how to walk and please God with a lifestyle of holiness). Then you will see how our selection sums it up. We are to be sanctified wholly or completely—spirit, soul, and body—by God’s great power, but it all begins with our holding firmly to what is good and abstaining from all evil.

That is holiness in action, inside and out.

Prerequisite to Holiness

As already mentioned, the words *sanctification* and *holiness* come from the same Greek root word, *hagios*.¹⁹⁴ Some want these words to mean two different things; but that is an incorrect understanding of the Greek. Both refer to the holiness in which we are to live and walk.

Keeping His commandments is a prerequisite to holiness. God has always spoken of this. To Israel He said: “This way you will remember and obey all My commands, and be holy to your God” (Num. 15:40 HCSB). Does He expect us to be less attentive to holiness today? God urges His people: “You shall keep yourselves from every evil thing....Therefore your camp shall be holy, that he [God] may not see an unclean thing in you...” (Deut. 23:9b, 14b).

Does this not sound like Paul in First Thessalonians 5:22? Holiness is the condition in which God sees nothing unclean in us. Erroneous grace teaching claims that we have already attained this state, completely and forever. They teach that God never sees our unrighteousness acts. There is a grain of truth here. In the regeneration of the new birth our past sins are wiped away and God sees us as righteous, holy, and pure, *in that moment* (see Rom. 3:25). But does this mean that believers can never do anything unclean ever again?

¹⁹⁴ See Strong’s G40.

Of course not. To say that God sees believers as being forever righteous even if they actively engage in lawless living is an idea that violates every principle of righteousness taught in both covenants.

After we are born again, we are taught to “cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit” (2 Cor. 7:1 NKJV). As long as we are on this side of glory, we must contend with this command, and lay aside every encumbrance and the sin that so easily entangles us, even as believers (see Heb. 12:1).

Sin and evil exist on this planet. We have to continually separate light from darkness, righteousness from unrighteousness, good from evil, and truth from error.¹⁹⁵ These are continuous processes for the believer on Earth in its present state. This is why John told us that Christians who sin must confess their sins and receive the Lord’s cleansing from unrighteousness (see 1 John 1:8–2:1).

James taught that believers should confess their sins to one another, and specifically when they come to the elders for the prayer of faith in regard to healing (see James 5:14-16). This is a humbling experience, but those who humble themselves and confess their sins to the Father receive His grace. Scripture says: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet. 5:5b; James 4:6b HCSB).

Those who cover their sins and claim they are righteous regardless of how much they sin are proud boasters. They are presumptuous and cannot claim the Father’s grace or mercy. The Scripture tells us plainly: “He who conceals his sins doesn’t prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy” (Prov. 28:13 WEB).

Keeping God’s Name Holy

When Jesus taught His disciples a certain prayer He began with the following words: “Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy” (Matt. 6:9 WEB). We are quick to mention other parts of this prayer, often without recognizing that Jesus first addressed the holiness of God’s name. This was the prayer’s entry point; it reveals where all prayer must start—with the consecration of His Name.

¹⁹⁵ See Ephesians 5:3-16; Romans 6:12-23; Hebrews 5:12-14; First John 1:5-10; 4:6.

We can consecrate His Name or we can desecrate it. It is never that God or His holiness is sullied; but we can soil His reputation as a holy God. When His Name is desecrated among the nations, the ungodly fail to esteem Him or His Word. They devalue God and His holy requirements, and they make Him out to be a liar.

This happens when His followers commit sin and wickedness. The world then thinks less of God based on the actions of His followers. His reputation and credibility are diminished in the world's eyes. Instead of His being glorified, He is vilified. And all because of evil demonstrated by those who claim to be His people!

This has been true throughout history. Depending upon the lifestyles of covenant people, the Name of God was either exalted or blasphemed among the Gentile nations.¹⁹⁶ When His people lived according to His commandments and holy standards, His Name was glorified and kept holy. When His people lived wickedly, then His Name was unjustly spat upon.

All prayer should start by honoring His Name with our fresh consecration to obedience and repentance for any failure in obeying His laws. Consecration of ourselves to God is demonstrated in the way we live and act, and is essential to the effective and fervent prayer that is acceptable before God. The prayers of the lawless and wicked are an abomination to Him. He does not delight in their prayers, unless they first humble themselves before Him in repentance.¹⁹⁷

Consecration of His Name is essential. It reminds us of His place and of ours. Without it, we are not spiritually positioned to receive answers to prayer. With it, we can enter into the fullness and efficacy of the complete prayer quoted in Matthew 6:9-13.

We are responsible to follow God's requirements in this; but part of keeping His name holy is asking for His divine help to strengthen us on the path of holiness. We are not alone! The way of holiness is not for the unclean. They will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it (see Isa. 35:8 NIV). It is not a physical road, but the

¹⁹⁶ There are numerous references to this in the Hebrew Bible. I offer a few to show how the sins of the people caused God's Name to be blasphemed or profaned among the nations (and how His Name is to be kept holy by our refusal to sin): Isaiah 29:23; 48:11; 52:5-6; Ezekiel 20:1-22; 43:8; Malachi 1:6, 11; 2:2; Revelation 2:13; 3:8.

¹⁹⁷ See James 4:1-10; 5:15-16; Proverbs 15:8, 29; 28:9; Second Chronicles 7:13-15; Nehemiah 1:11; Isaiah 1:15-20.

Christian walk¹⁹⁸ mentioned in the book of Acts. (Isaiah 35:8 was a prophetic description of it.) The Way is Jesus' way, because *He is the way* (see John 14:6).

We are to follow Him. He is holy and requires us to live holy. We cannot say we are followers of the Way and live unholy. My prayer is that this chapter has made you keenly aware of the place of holiness in the Christian walk. Holiness has not been dispensed with; it is essential for those who are called righteous and who live under God's great grace.

¹⁹⁸ Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22.

The Fear of the Lord

One of the greatest keys to a glorious relationship-fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is to walk in the fear of the Lord. Oddly enough, the subject is rarely taught these days, and the fear of the Lord is rarely observed. Most believers are woefully unfamiliar with the subject and some have confused evil fears (based in lack of trust in God) with the fear of the Lord, as though the two were equivalent.

They are not.

When God commanded His people to “Fear not,” He was not forbidding the fear of the Lord. As fears go, these two fall on opposite ends of the spectrum. One speaks of fearing evil, evil circumstances, people, and so on. The other is about reverencing God. The first is sin; the second is a holy command.

Abba and the Spirit of Bondage Again to Fear

Some of our modern ways of addressing God are disrespectful, dishonoring, and reduce our regard of Him to the mundane. Some preachers and others think the disrespectful words used are terms of endearment and intimacy. In reality, they show a lack of understanding of the Scripture.

Abraham was called a friend of God and the father of our faith (see James 2:23; Rom. 4:11, 12, 16). Yet Abraham never “befriended” God by using diminutive terms such as *Buddy*, *Daddy*, or *Paw-paw*.

This tendency is often justified with a misuse of the following verse: “You did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption, by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8:15 NKJV). As a result, some call God their “Daddy,” because they believe that *Abba* and *Daddy* are interchangeable.

Abba was always a term of respect and honor when used by a man’s young children and older sons. It was used reverentially and not in disrespect. It was a far cry from, “Yo! Big Daddy in the sky. You’re my sugar daddy for all I want and need. That’s You, my

main man, my divine dude, my Daddy God! All's good between us! And Jesus, You're my bro, my Big J!"

These are some of the absurd titles I have actually heard used. Instead of suggesting a friendlier approach to God, they reveal a huge misunderstanding and the absence of a reverential fear of the Almighty (see Ps. 36:1; Rom. 3:18). Yes, Paul used the Aramaic word *Abba*¹⁹⁹ to translate the Greek word for "father." He was letting the Romans know that God is our Father, full of mercy, compassion, grace, and love—the One we are to respect and honor as the Creator, full of glory and power.

The shocker for the misinformed is this: *Abba* is not a term of endearment as is commonly believed! Because *Abba* was used by adult sons it cannot refer to "Daddy" as if in baby speech.²⁰⁰ The Greek language has a word of that kind for father: it is *Pappas*. This is closer to our idea of "Daddy" spoken by a young child (and almost identical to *Papá* or *Papí* in Spanish).

Interestingly, the early Church never adopted *Pappas* for God. That is the word Paul would most likely have chosen if "Daddy" had been his intended meaning. Instead, Paul taught the opposite about *Abba* (see Gal. 3:22–4:7), making clear that the reference was not baby speech at all, but a word used by a grown son who was an appointed heir.

The word *Abba* has a lengthy history. It was borrowed from Aramaic by Hebrew speakers, and was often found in ancient Jewish literature, liturgy, and prayers. Ancient rabbis used it as a title of honor.²⁰¹ *Av* (Hebrew for "father") was how ancient Jews referred to the father of the Sanhedrin, the vice president of the Sanhedrin council.

Notice that each time *Abba* appears in transliteration it is followed by the Greek words *ho pater*, which literally mean "the father."²⁰² Paul offered this translation for

199 In Israeli Hebrew it is heard often from young children calling for their fathers; but the use of this word in ancient times was quite different from its use in modern Israel.

200 See article by James Barr, "Abba Isn't 'Daddy,'" *The Journal of Theological Studies*, 1988, 39 (1), 28-47, <http://jts.oxfordjournals.org/content/39/1/28.full.pdf+html>.

201 See Babylonian Talmud: Berakhot 16b.

202 The Greek phrase *abba ho pater* is found only in Mark 14:36; Romans 8:15; and Galatians 4:6.

those unfamiliar with the Aramaic *Abba*. He was letting his Greek-speaking audience know that *Abba* was equal in meaning to *Father*.²⁰³

The Fear of the Lord Never Changed

One strange exposition of Romans 8:15 has claimed that the fear of the Lord in the Hebrew Bible is not the same as the fear of the Lord in the New Testament. The interpretation asserts that the Old Testament fear of the Lord was the “spirit of bondage again to fear” (Rom. 8:15). The explanation given is that, under grace, we are delivered from this “bondage.”

That is shocking. Who has the right to equate the Hebrew Bible’s fear of the Lord with the spirit of bondage? The idea is heretical and blasphemous. For it to be true, the fear of the Lord would have to lose its purity and become evil. Scripture soundly refutes the idea, declaring: “The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever...” (Ps. 19:9 HCSB). There is no expiration date on the fear of the Lord!

The Greek word translated “bondage” in Romans 8:15 is the same word used by Paul in verse 21 and translated “the bondage of corruption.” It is also used when referring to the fear of death that brings people into bondage (see Heb. 2:15). Unless the fear of the Lord is now associated with corruption on Planet Earth and the last enemy, called Death, Romans 8:15 cannot possibly suggest the fear of the Lord (see 1 Cor. 15:26).

Let’s get this straight! The fear of the Lord in the New Testament is the same fear of the Lord taught in the Hebrew Bible.

Fearing the Lord: Holiness, Grace, and Obedience

The fear of the Lord is inherent to holy living; in fact, one is perfected in the other. Though we have quoted these verses in other places by emphasizing different parts, here is the connection of this portion of Scripture to the fear of the Lord:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with

203 On other occasions, the audience needed translation of words used from other languages. See Mark 5:41; 15:22, 33; John 1:38, 41, 42; 9:7. See also Acts 4:36; 9:36; 13:8; Hebrews 7:2. Paul’s translation of words from other languages should not surprise us.

darkness? And what accord [agreement] has Christ with Belial [the devil]? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore, "Come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be to you a Father, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty." Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God (2 Corinthians 6:14–7:1 NKJV).

To understand the filthiness of flesh and spirit to which Paul referred in this passage, explore the context that begins in chapter six verses fourteen through eighteen.

The filthiness is removed by cleansing oneself, perfecting *holiness in the fear of the Lord*. The two are intimately connected. One cannot function without the other.

Like Paul, Peter also provided context for the reverential fear of the Lord:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, be sober and set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ—as children of obedience, not conforming yourselves according to your former lusts as in your ignorance, but just as he who called you is holy, you yourselves also be holy in all of your behavior; because it is written, "You shall be holy; for I am holy." If you call on him as Father, who without respect of persons judges according to each man's work, pass the time of your living as foreigners here in reverent fear... (1 Peter 1:13-17).

Notice that grace is brought to us at the revelation of Jesus Christ, as children of obedience. Peter shows that grace includes the obedience of those not conformed to the flesh but having holy behavior, and living in—what else?—the reverential fear of the Lord.

No study of grace can ignore these truths. Grace cannot be separated from obedience, holy behavior, or the fear of the Lord. Peter did not separate them, and neither should we.²⁰⁴

Fearing the Lord: Awe, Honor, and Respect

In the book of Acts, we see that the early Church walked in awe of God: “Reverential awe [fear, respect, honor, high esteem] came over everyone, and many wonders and miraculous signs came about by the apostles” (Acts 2:43 NET).

Awe is a direct reference to and descriptor of the fear of the Lord. The Greek word *phobos* translated “awe” in this verse is the same word used for the fear of the Lord in the New Testament.²⁰⁵

Brother Bill Davis once told me that *awe* was the posture of the early Church when they walked in signs and wonders. He added that the modern Church must have this awe if it is to demonstrate such power today. I wholeheartedly agree; yet the fear of the Lord is unknown by most of the Church.

This is not true of Brother Bill. He has walked in the fear of the Lord as long as I have known him. In 1974, not long after I received Jesus as my Lord, I became a member of the church in Tampa, Florida where Brother Bill was an elder. In those days, this particular church had a powerful youth ministry, and the gifts of the Spirit flowed abundantly in every service.

To my stunned surprise, Brother Bill called me out during a certain Sunday morning service and began giving me a word from the Lord. Then came the unexpected—he rebuked me, saying I was to get away from the woman I was dating because it was sin and she and I both knew it.

Yikes! He rebuked my sin in front of about eight hundred people! Do you know what that did to that young woman and me? The woman was standing next to me in the service. There was nowhere to hide. Secret sins were exposed to the light! The

²⁰⁴ This harmonizes perfectly with Titus 2:11-12.

²⁰⁵ Acts 5:5, 11; 9:31; 19:17 also used this same word.

embarrassment and shame we felt made us turn every shade of red! We split up immediately.

Do you know what happened to the church, and especially the young people? We all talked about living right for God, because we feared being rebuked publicly for our sin. We began to walk in awe of God and His truth, as though walking on eggshells. If I thought I had sinned, I repented quickly and begged the Lord not to call me out like that again! A few times I stayed home on Sunday because I knew what I had done on Saturday night!

Study Acts chapter five. It says that the Church was in the fear or awe of God after the public rebuke and deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:11). It was after this that miracles, signs, and wonders broke out. That should shake us up, as the following Scripture passage also will. The speaker in this case is God Himself:

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. But if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is your fear of Me? says Yahweh of Hosts to you priests, who despise My name.” Yet you ask: “How have we despised Your name?” “By presenting defiled food on My altar.” You ask: “How have we defiled You?” When you say: “The LORD’S table is contemptible. When you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not wrong [evil]? And when you present a lame or sick animal, is it not wrong [evil]? Bring it to your governor! Would he be pleased with you or show you favor?” asks the Lord of Hosts. “And now, ask for God’s favor. Will He be gracious to us? Since this has come from your hands, will He show any of you favor?” asks the Lord of Hosts. ... “The deceiver is cursed, who has an acceptable male in his flock and makes a vow but sacrifices a defective animal to the Lord. For I am, a great King,” says Yahweh of Hosts, “and My name will be feared among the nations” (Malachi 1:6-9, 14 HCSB).

Honor and the fear of the Lord go hand in hand. We cannot call Him Father and disrespect Him, His holy Word, or His commandments. We cannot offer sacrifices that are after-thoughts or defective, supposing that He will be pleased or honored by them.

Israel had very specific commandments concerning animal sacrifices. To offer to God a sick animal was abominable, honor-less, and disrespectful. It said the giver despised the holy Name of the Lord. Therefore, God rejects such offerings and will receive nothing but the very best!

Church, please listen to God’s Word: “Now ask for God’s favor. Will He be gracious to us? Since this has come from your hands, will He show any of you favor?” asks the LORD of Hosts” (Mal. 1:9 HCSB).

We either do things God’s way or we are rejected. Prayer (asking for the favor of God) doesn’t work for the rebellious and disobedient. They think they can use their own devices instead of following God’s revealed will. Some think they will receive God’s grace in their lawlessness. There is no grace, entreaty in prayer, or gracious dealings for those who practice intentional disobedience to God’s Word and commandments. The only way out is true repentance that leads to a concrete change and the cleansing from unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus (see 1 John 1:7-9).

Many have false mind-sets about prayer, but here is what God says: “One who turns away his ear²⁰⁶ from hearing the law,²⁰⁷ even his prayer is an abomination” (Prov. 28:9 NKJV). Only those who obey Him can please Him.

Jesus spoke along the same lines when He said the following:

If you abide [stay, remain, make your abode, dwell] in Me, and My words abide [stay, remain, make their abode, dwell] in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you (John 15:7 NKJV).

Most want the grace of answered prayer without abiding in Him or allowing His Word to abide in them. The abiding Word is not Scripture memorization or meditation; it is not an image framed in the mind or heart. It is the obedience of doing His Word and walking in His kind of love.²⁰⁸

The Fear of the Lord Defined

²⁰⁶ This is a Hebrew idiom meaning that one refuses to obey and is rebellious toward instruction, in this case, from God’s law.

²⁰⁷ In the Hebrew, *torah*—God’s Word, instruction, or His holy commandments.

²⁰⁸ See John 15:9-10; 14:21-23.

Now that we have seen basic Scripture references to the fear of the Lord, let's define it. The word *fear*, when used in reference to God and the things of God, the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit is described as reverence, honor, respect, high esteem, and awe. The meanings of these words overlap, but their study opens our understanding to the deep significance of fearing of the Lord. Let's unpack it!

1. *Reverence* means to show and feel honor and respect and show deference to Him. He deserves respect and esteem because He is superior to us. We show reverence as we submit to Him who is superior, and as we obey His judgment, opinion, desire, will, and so on. We highly regard His worth and merit. (See Malachi 1:6 and 2:2.)

2. *Honor* means esteem, showing due respect, purity, and the integrity shown to and for His word. Being honest, fair, trusting, and paying close attention to God shows our honor for Him. Honor pays homage, shows reverence for, deference to, and high esteem for God.

3. *Respect* indicates profound reverence mingled with love, devotion, or a respectful worship. Another descriptor is deference; it implies that we willingly subject ourselves to His judgment and prefer Him above all others out of great reverence and honor for Him.

4. *High esteem* indicates admiration, adoration, approval, and bowing down before Him. To have a high esteem means that we treat God with utmost honor and give Him credit; we exalt, glorify, and magnify Him by ascribing to Him the highest reputation and greatest grandeur.

5. *Awe* is an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, and extremely powerful, as in awe of God.²⁰⁹

209 For Hebrew usage, see BDB coded to Strong's H3373, 3374 or 431b-432a. In BDB, H3373 see def. 2 and 3, Niph. def. 2 and 3, H3374 def. 3 and 4. For Greek usage see BAGD 863-2a; Strong's #5401 def. 2; TDNT 9:189, 1272; and Thayer 656b. I used all of these definitions to compile this list. The definitions of the main words are composites from several English-language dictionaries such as *Webster's*, *Miriam-Webster*, *Collins*, and others.

In reviewing these words carefully, we begin to see a huge void in the modern Church. In my opinion, this is more evident in American and Western Christianity, and I am saying this as a loyal American citizen.²¹⁰ I have no axe to grind concerning America or the West. My comment is based on observation. The disrespect and dishonor being done to God and His Word, and the flagrant disregard for His commandments is often scandalous.

Honor and Respect for God's Presence

We must be strict about honoring and respecting God's presence. It is truly disturbing to see it disrespected in churches, conventions, and Christian activities. Before services start, you find in many sanctuaries people who are laughing or joking. They talk about football, social events, and the restaurant they want to visit after service is over.

If the President of the United States or some other important person were to enter the sanctuary, everyone would stop talking and listen for something vital or even life-changing that might be said. Why would such reverence be shown? Because we respect dignitaries and their high positions in government, business, or society. We honor them and want to hear what they have to say.

What about honoring the Spirit of God and respecting His holy presence? Remember: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I [God] am a father, then where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is the respect [fear] due me?..." (Mal.1:6 WEB).

In most churches I've visited in recent years, little respect is shown and there is no expectation that God will manifest Himself. Instead of chit-chatting, God's people should be reading their Bibles, praying, or sitting quietly in preparation for a divine encounter with God in His power. They should anticipate the awesome Presence that will soon flood the service. Deep respect and honor should be shown to the Creator.

210 For the record, Puerto Ricans are born American citizens as of March 2, 1917. Puerto Rico is a US territory.

If we really believed that Jesus would appear in His great power, our attitude and behavior would be very different. When He does show up, everyone will hit the floor! Ask the apostles John and Saul of Tarsus! (See Revelation 1; Acts 9.)

So here's my question: would you chat, chew gum, tell inappropriate jokes, talk about the latest movie, send text messages, read your e-mail, or play video games if suddenly God appeared in His glory? Of course not! Because many of us act on the assumption that He will not, He is not seen in many churches! Their actions are not of devotion, faithfulness, and expectation. Therefore, it is impossible for God to be pleased with them (see Heb. 11:6). In the place where the ministry of the Holy Spirit is given, we must respect His presence.

The psalmist linked reverence to salvation, writing: "Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that glory may dwell in our land" (Ps. 85:9 WEB). Salvation in the Hebrew indicates deliverance, rescue, welfare, prosperity, victory, and deliverance from moral evils; to save, preserve (protect), heal, and thrive.²¹¹ This marvelous kind of salvation is near (in close relationship with and will encounter) those who fear the Lord.

What is the purpose of this great deliverance-salvation that comes upon those who fear the Lord? It comes so that God's glory may dwell in our land! So many want revival on the earth and are praying earnestly for it (as I also have). The Lord says that if we want His glory to dwell and not just visit, it begins with the fear of the Lord.

Do you see why this subject is so vital? The Lord is calling on ministers, preachers, teachers, and all followers of Jesus to minister in this vein, and instill the fear of the Lord in every church on every continent. Doing so will manifest His deliverance-salvation, and cause His glory to remain in our midst.

This is how the Church of the living God will be a glorious Church when Jesus returns! (See Ephesians 5:26-27.)

Fear of the Lord and Intimacy with God

211 See Strong's H3468 and BDB coded to Strong's.

Intimacy with God is a popular topic. It should be, because real intimacy with Him is essential to the covenant relationship. Notice what David wrote: “The secret counsel of the LORD is for those who fear Him, and He reveals His covenant to them” (Ps. 25:14 HCSB).

Counsel or intimate advice²¹² flows where intimacy with God is real. That intimacy does not manifest by singing the right worship songs for the correct length of time. It is born of the fear of God. I have nothing against anointed worship. Notice that I said *anointed* worship. When a worship team is anointed, it can be powerful and can prepare the people to receive the Holy Spirit’s ministry in the Word with demonstration (see 1 Cor. 2:4). But true intimacy also involves the fear of the Lord.

The counsel of the Lord refers to the Lord’s inner circle. Many look for intimacy with God in the wrong ways. To have a place in God’s inner circle, we must live in the fear of the Lord. There must be respect, honor, and awe of Him and His Word. He must be approached with reverence and the utmost regard.

The *secret counsel*²¹³ is an inner chamber where God is intimate with His people. It is a fellowship unknown to the world, an intimate, familiar conversation with God. The fear of the Lord answers the human need for intimacy with Him. There is no other way into His intimate place.

People often read about the throne of God’s grace and about our ability in Christ to enter into the holiest place of God (see Heb. 4:16). All of this is true, but it is through the blood of Christ. What Jesus did for us must be honored, respected, and revered. We are to be in awe of Him and His eternal sacrifice, honoring His blood and the fact that He gave His *all* for us.

There is no such thing as honoring God while disrespecting who Jesus is or what He did. To respect and reverence God is to do the same for His Son. This brings revelation of the covenant. God births this revelation in the hearts of those who honor Him. The fear of

²¹² For example, as when seated at a roundtable. The *Lexham English Bible* translates *The secret counsel of the LORD* “as “Intimate fellowship with Yahweh” in Psalms 25:14.

²¹³ In the Hebrew, *sod*. See Strong’s H5475; BDB 691c.

the Lord is where it all starts. It is the birthplace of wisdom and understanding (see Ps. 111:10).

Choosing the Fear of the Lord

Having a free will means making choices, often of eternal consequence. Scripture warns that some will call on God, but go unanswered, “because they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD” (Prov. 1:29).

The fear of God must be chosen. To choose means to decide, select, desire, prefer, and require.²¹⁴ Whether or not we walk in the fear of the Lord is our choice. So choose wisely! Desire the fear of the Lord and require it of yourself. As always, obedience to His commands leads to life and blessing; disobedience leads to destruction and death.

“Your fear of him will keep you from sinning!” (Exod. 20:20 NLT). To sin means to forget the fear of the Lord. Many Christians readily yield to temptation because they lack this reverential fear; but those who stay in it stay out of sin.²¹⁵

Can you see why the reverential fear and awe of the Lord are so significant?²¹⁶

Fearing the Lord from a Right Heart

Fearing the Lord requires a right heart and always leads to the keeping of His commandments.

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep [do, obey] all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever! (Deuteronomy 5:29 NKJV).

A wrong and deceitful heart moves in the opposite direction. This truth should bring correction to those who believe that God looks at the heart and ignores the outward behavior. It is impossible to have a right heart and act wickedly. A good heart produces a holy lifestyle. A good heart fears God *and* does His commandments! Remember: Jesus taught that all evil acts begin in the heart:

²¹⁴ See Deuteronomy 30:19.

²¹⁵ To sin is to fail, lose your way, go after what is evil, incur guilt because of doing evil, forfeit something because of an error; it is an offense or a crime. First John 3:4, Romans 14:23, and James 4:17 sum up what sin is.

²¹⁶ See also Psalms 36:1; Proverbs 3:7; 8:13; 16:6.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, sexual sins, thefts, false testimony, and blasphemies. These are the things which defile the man... (Matthew 15:19-20 WEB).

No one “just happens” to commit adultery or murder or any other grave sin. Sin begins with what is allowed to enter the heart over time, until it is acted out in the body. This is why Jesus taught that a man who lusts after a woman has already committed adultery in his heart (see Matt. 5:27-28). The heart leads the way—either toward righteousness or wickedness. Whatever is fixed in the heart eventually produces action, unless heartfelt repentance and genuine change prevent it.

We have to pluck sin out of our hearts as though cutting off an outward, physical member! (See Matthew 5:29-30.) Amputating a hand or eye is extreme to our thinking, and doing such a thing was not Jesus’ literal intent. But the idea represents the determination necessary to remove defilement from the flesh and spirit. Paul taught us to crucify the flesh and put to death any of its deeds that violate God’s commandments (see Gal. 5:24; Col. 3:5). He was not asking us to harm ourselves physically, either, but his words portrayed the tenacity we must have as believers. We must be resolute in this!

The wishy-washy need not apply!

James explains the commission of sin in words that parallel those of Jesus. James breaks down the process for us, beginning in the heart:

But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death (James 1:14-15 NKJV).

When desire is conceived in the womb of the heart, it eventually gives birth to sin. When sin is “full-grown,” it brings forth death. Full-grown sin is sin that has been practiced and developed to the point of full-on wickedness. Once this stage is reached, only swift repentance and cleansing in the blood of Christ can preclude the consequence of death.

A right heart leads us away from such consequences! The heart that fears the Lord produces a believer who serves Him with his or her whole heart, obeys Him, and never rebels against His commandments.

If you fear the LORD and serve Him and obey His voice, and do not rebel against the commandment of the LORD, then both you and the king who reigns over you will continue following the LORD your God. ... Only fear the LORD, and serve Him in truth with all your heart; for consider what great things He has done for you (1 Samuel 12:14, 24 NKJV).

You may have been taught that you can be right with God even if you sin. Not according to this verse! You and I cannot say we have the truth of God in our hearts if we continue to disobey Him and rebel against His commandments.

Learning the Fear of the Lord

God's Word is purposeful, as any study of Scripture reveals. One of its purposes involves a learning process for God's people:

Assemble me the people, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children (Deuteronomy 4:10b).

By hearing God's anointed Word we learn to fear Him always, so that we can teach His Word and ways to our children. But do we approach God's Word this way when we gather in His name? Or do we see the hearing of the Word as an opportunity to add to our biblical information base?

The difference in these approaches is stark. Sadly, the latter is more common than the former. I daresay not many come to the Word with their hearts set on passing it on to their children. Yet, that *should* be why we hear the Word—so faith-faithfulness comes and leads us to do God's bidding.

We cannot do it without faith. Paul knew that and wrote the following, under the influence of the Holy Spirit:

They have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, “LORD, who has believed our report?” So then faith²¹⁷ comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:16-17 NKJV).

Many quote verse 17 but ignore the previous verse which defines what kind of hearing Paul had in mind. To obey the gospel is true believing and trusting in the report of the Lord. There is no such thing as believing or trusting in His Word without obedience. Saying we believe is not the same as believing. The proof is in our obedience!

In this context, hearing includes trusting and obeying. That is how Paul understood it. Apparently James did, too. He said that faith without works (corresponding actions of obedience) is a faith that is graveyard dead (see James 2:22, 26).

Men and women throughout the ages have proved their faith by their acts—even under the most difficult circumstances. Job was a man whose lifestyle pleased God so much that He spoke highly of Job to the devil!

The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant, Job? For there is none like him in the earth, a blameless and an upright man, one who fears God, and turns away from evil” (Job 1:8).

During this time in history, no one on Earth had Job’s spiritual qualifications. There was not yet an Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, or Joshua. Because Job feared God, he turned away from evil. Even the devil knew that Job feared God. He saw how God had blessed the man in every way and built a hedge of protection around him. Something happened to bring the hedge down, but that is a teaching for another day. The point here is that Job got Satan’s attention and Satan wanted to destroy him, *because* he feared the Lord as no one else did.

The fear of the Lord is profound, as the DARET version (*aka*, Dan Alan Rodriguez’s Expanded Translation) of Psalms 19:9 explains: “The fear of Yahveh²¹⁸ is pure, enduring forever. Trust His judgments. They are completely righteous.”

217 Faith includes: trust, faithfulness, loyalty, and obedience. Do you remember our study of the Greek and Hebrew words for faith in Chapter 4?

218 In the Hebrew, *YHVH*, often transliterated as “Jehovah.”

Learning the fear of the Lord causes us to live in purity. It takes us from living by the dictates of the old nature (before we were in Christ), to being followers of Jesus who live to serve Him from sincere and pure hearts.

The fear of the Lord empowers our walk with Him by causing us to endure. The Hebrew word translated “enduring”²¹⁹ in Psalms 19:9 means taking a stand, persisting, and being steadfast. It means we have the strength and courage to stand when others fall into despair and destruction.

The fear of the Lord brings a supernatural, establishing power. It settles us in God’s truth and leads to His eternal life. It causes us to have the continuity of His life in and around us.²²⁰ The fear of the Lord causes us to live in God’s eternal realm where all things are possible.

No wonder David wrote the following: “You who fear the LORD, praise him! All you descendants of Jacob, glorify him! Stand in awe of him, all you descendants of Israel!” (Ps. 22:23). To fear the Lord leads us to praise Him. The Hebrew word for praise is more than what we typically think, and is more than speaking praise concerning Him.²²¹ The word speaks of shining or shining forth. It refers to God’s favor shining forth on us as we walk in reverence, honor, and the respect of God.

The fear of the Lord is a cornerstone of the Christian life. Solomon underscored its magnitude: “*Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man’s all*” (Eccles. 12:13 NKJV).

219 In the Hebrew, *amad*—Strong’s H5975.

220 The Hebrew word translated “forever” in Psalms 19:9 is *ad*. See Strong’s H5703.

221 “Praise,” in Hebrew is *halal*. See Strong’s H1984; see also in BDB.

A Temple of the Holy

God no longer requires a temple of stones. We are His temple, and His Holy Spirit resides within us. When we embrace this glorious truth we are transformed. No wonder the apostle Paul had much to say about it:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be! Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute is one body? For, "The two," says he, "will become one flesh." But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit. Flee sexual immorality! "Every sin that a man does is outside the body," but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, which is in you, which you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. Therefore glorify God in your body [and in your spirit, which are God's]²²² (1 Corinthians 6:15-20).

Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him; for God's temple is holy, which you are (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

These passages tell us that God's temple is holy and "your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit." I heard the Spirit say it in my heart this way: *"A temple of the holy."*

Wow! Those who have ears, let them hear! Our bodies and our entire beings are temples of the holy! Spirit *and* body, we are His temple. Therefore, holiness is to be pervasive in both. Our spirits and bodies must be kept in holiness, agreeing with His holy Word and His commandments in partnership with His Spirit, and "siding with" the Lord and His agenda.

His will is for His holy temple. He wants us to commune there with what is holy. His presence is to be manifested in and through His temple; therefore, we are to manifest His

222 Per the NHEB, in regard to bracketed verbiage: "NU Vg. M TR add."

holiness. This positions us for His power and glory. As we glorify God in both spirit and body, He pours out His glory and presence through us and His power flows. That is His plan; it is what He desires to do in and through every believer.

Cleansing the Temple

The following scriptures are powerful! Please read them and consider how their context informs my comments following it:

After this, he went down to Capernaum, he, and his mother, his brothers, and his disciples; and they stayed there a few days. The Jewish Passover was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. He found in the temple those who sold oxen, sheep, and doves, and the changers of money sitting. He made a whip of cords, and threw all out of the temple, both the sheep and the oxen; and he poured out the changers' money, and overthrew their tables. To those who sold the doves, he said, "Take these things out of here! Do not make my Father's house a marketplace!" His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will eat me up" (John 2:12-17).

Jesus entered into the temple, and drove out all of those who sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the moneychangers' tables and the seats of those who sold the doves. He said to them, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you have made it a den of robbers!" The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he healed them (Matthew 21:12-14).

When the ancient Temple was cleansed, healing power was manifested. The blind and the lame came to Jesus and were healed.

Holiness made way for His glory to be manifested. It did not happen until the "trash" was removed from God's Temple. Blindness to the divine will and the inability to walk on God's highway of holiness (*i.e.*, being lame) were cleansed away, readying the Temple for manifestation of His glory (see Isa. 35:8).

Jesus did what He did to allow God's glory to manifest in a temple of stone. He set the example. For His holy presence to show up we must handle our temples (of spirit and body) the same way.

When Jesus first came into my temple, He cleansed me by His blood. Now it is my responsibility to keep out the trash. If any shows up, I must zealously drive it out. This prepares a place for His Spirit to manifest the *shechinah*²²³ glory of God!

This is one the great keys to revival. It happens when God's leaders first clean up their own acts. It then transfers through them to the people. When God's people walk according to God's Word and commandments demanding holiness of themselves, God manifests Himself powerfully through them. This principle is not personal but biblical, as a passage from Jeremiah shows:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place. Do not trust in these lying words, saying, 'The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord are these.' "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt, then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever. "Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations'? Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the Lord. "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I

223 Most transliterate this Hebrew word as *shekinah*, but it has no "k" sound. The "k" represents a guttural sound that I transliterated here as "ch." English has no counterpart for the sound, so take your pick!

did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel (Jeremiah 7:3-12 NKJV).

To walk in holiness, we must be vigilant and always ready to take out the trash!

I Will Never Leave or Forsake You

So many think God dwells in them regardless of their sin. This is not so. I have heard too many confess Hebrews 13:5 as though it were unconditional and absolute. It simply says: “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Heb. 13:5b).

That sounds conclusive, but before we reach wrong conclusions, let’s read some of the text preceding verse 5:

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers. Be free from the love of money [covetousness], content with such things as you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you” (Hebrews 13:4-5).

Many who stand on the promise, “I will never leave you or forsake you” have never considered its context. The marriage bed of a man and his wife is to be maintained in honor, free of adultery. The next line says: “for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterers.” Adulterers are married, but having sex with other partners. The sexually immoral includes lesbians, homosexuals, the incestuous, those having sex outside of marriage, and those engaging in sex with animals. Sexual immorality also includes orgies and pornography. Unless these sins are confessed and repentance is real, God will judge the people who practice such perversions. I didn’t write it. The writer of Hebrews did.

Elsewhere, Paul said God would avenge those who defraud their brothers and sisters in these matters.²²⁴ Having God as an avenger against you is no laughing matter. I would prefer to stay on the side of His love and mercy by living a holy life! I believe you would, too. So please study all of First Thessalonians 4:1-12. It contains important instructions for right and holy living and dispels the rumor that God ignores the sins of born-again

²²⁴ See First Thessalonians 4:1-8; Ephesians 5:3-6; and First Corinthians 6: 9-10.

believers. John also clarifies this truth with his declaration that those who walk in darkness cannot fellowship with the Lord.²²⁵

Hebrews 13 goes on to mention the love of money, which is covetousness (see also, 1 Tim. 6:10). Paul taught that covetousness is idolatry, and that the wrath of God will come to those practicing these acts of disobedience (see Col. 3:5-6). Those who persist in these evils are defiling God's temple. They will be judged by Him and cannot claim that He will never leave nor forsake them.

This bears repeating: God will always take back into His grace the humble who repent and confess their sins to Him. However, those who willfully *persist* in rebellion against God will lose the benefit of the Hebrews 13:5 promise. If we honor Him, He will honor us. If we lightly esteem Him, He will reject us. This is a Bible principle found throughout its pages (see 1 Sam. 2:30). If we forsake the Lord, He will forsake us.²²⁶

Many disbelieve this. It is not a popular preaching that tickles the senses. Yet it is scriptural. Regardless of what we would like to believe, God is not with the rebellious and the wicked. He is however, ready to receive the prodigals who repent and return to Him.

He is always ready for that!

Honor for Honor

God honors those who honor Him and rejects those who reject Him. A well-known verse says as much, but most people quote only its first sentence:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you from being my priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your children (Hosea 4:6 NASB).

²²⁵ See First John 1:6. The NET version of First John 1:6-8 is enlightening: "If we say we do not bear the guilt of sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." Some in Christendom think that if you sin as a believer you will not bear the guilt of your sin. That is deception, according to John. Yes, you will bear the guilt of your sin unless you confess your sin to God and receive cleansing and forgiveness from Him (see 1 John 1:9).

²²⁶ Read as an example, Isaiah 1.

When people reject God's Word, they are rebellious and disobedient, and He rejects them. I know seeker-friendly "grace-ology" followers disagree, but Hosea 4:6 contradicts such fluff. We need the truth more today than ever before!

Paul saw Israel as an example for us. Israel persisted in sin, and God turned them over to their enemies for destruction.²²⁷ They would repent, and God would take them back. Invariably, they repeated their wrongs, over and over again.

Read Psalms 78 sometime. Then read the book of Judges. The two are very similar. Verses 56-64 of Psalm 78 are telling. The children of Israel rebelled and sinned greatly against God until He finally rejected (abhorred) and forsook²²⁸ them. They were turned over to their enemies and destroyed. This example should warn us.

God will never leave those who choose to walk with Him. We draw near to God and He draws near to us. He is always there for the humble and repentant (see James 4:6, 8). The same is true for those who obey, honor, respect, fear, highly esteem, and love Him by doing His commandments. I repeat: the rebellious and ungodly (whether sinners or those who were once Christians) do not enjoy the same privileges. To believe otherwise is to be self-deceived and non-biblical!

When the Spirit is grieved continuously by a believer's sin and unrighteousness, He backs off and eventually leaves that temple. It happened to the Temple in Israel, which was only a shadow of the temple we now are. God's *shechinah*, His holy presence, left the house because Israel persisted in ungodliness.

We must never push the Holy Spirit this way. God forbid He should write on the doorposts of our hearts, *Ichabod*, meaning, "the glory has departed" (see 1 Sam. 4:21-22).

Not Partnered with Ungodliness, but with God

We were not delivered in Christ to continue the abominations outlined in Jeremiah 7:4-12 (especially verse 10). We cannot point to ourselves in presumptuous pride saying, "Oh, we are the Lord's temple, the Lord's temple," and simultaneously partner with the ungodliness of this world.

²²⁷ See First Corinthians 10:1-12. (Study the whole chapter!)

²²⁸ Leaving, abandoning, casting off, letting them fall

That has never worked, because God has never changed. As He was in Jeremiah's day, He remains today. He did not save us by grace so we could continue in sin! He saved us to do good works!²²⁹ We are supposed to:

- Understand and do the will of God so we can walk worthy of the Lord and please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work (see Eph. 5:17; Col. 1:9-10)
- Obey His commandments and keep the love commandment (see John 14:21-23; 13:34)
- Walk humbly before Him all the days we are on the earth (see Mic. 6:8; 2 Chron. 7:14)
- Minister to others, as He leads (see 1 John 3:17-18)
- Glorify Him in our spirits and in our bodies every day (see 1 Cor. 6:20)
- Carry out the commission of Mark 16:15-18
- Be led by the Spirit and live for God 24/7! (See Romans 8:14, 16.)

These are some of the good works we should be zealous to do! (See Titus 2:14.) Being set apart unto God, holy and sanctified, is His will for us (see 1 Thess. 4:3, 7). Living in faith-faithfulness, trust, and loyalty toward God is what we are supposed to do (see Rom. 1:17). That is how we please Him (see Heb. 11:6).

Good-bye, Trash!

God is calling all His people everywhere to repent and rid themselves of any garbage in their temples. It's time to take out the trash!

The Lord gave me a spiritual vision that marked me. A well-known man of God, now in heaven, was with me in the vision, which was centered in a large, covered basketball court. The setting was unexpected because I deeply dislike basketball. If I had created the vision in my own mind, we would have been on a sailboat or by the beach. I never was entertained by football, basketball, soccer, or baseball. Please forget golf! It is

²²⁹ See Romans 6:1, 15; Ephesians 2:8-10.

so boring that I would rather work in the yard than have to endure golf on TV, and I am no fan of yard work! I know that my disdain for national sports may seem weird to most guys, but for the record, I don't like ballet or musicals either! Give me a championship boxing or UFC match and I am tuned in! I'd rather be on a boat, SCUBA diving, or just having fun at the beach!

I said all that so you get how weird this dream/vision truly was to me. It was not a creation of my brain!

In the vision, the man of God stood before a big pile of trash in the middle of the basketball court, which was part of the church complex. I had followed this man out of the sanctuary to where he now stood. My job was to help him gather the trash into a very large garbage bin. In the pile were branches, wires, and some of the strangest objects I have ever seen, including a peculiar crutch-like apparatus that only an octopus could have used!

The man of God looked at it and said, "Throw that out. It will never work."

As I came out of the vision, the Lord spoke to my heart concerning the spiritual condition of many in His Church. He simply said, "It's time to take out the trash!"

When Jesus cleansed the temple of the moneychangers, their wares, and their selling stations, He quoted Jeremiah 7:11 which says: "The house that is called by my name has become a gathering place for thieves" (GW).

The tables and animals were only part of the evil that was being done. Jeremiah 7 reveals all kinds of wickedness in the Temple. It was the same stuff that was operating in the priests. Jesus made an example of the moneychangers to reveal the Jeremiah 7 condition of both. The reference to robbery highlighted the theft, murder, adultery, false witnessing, and idolatry that had invaded the Lord's house. In cleansing the Temple, Jesus fulfilled the scripture that said: "Zeal for your house has eaten me up" (Ps. 69:9 NKJV; see also John 2:17 NKJV).

Jesus wrapped Himself in zeal like a mantle (see Isa. 59:17) and set a clear example for us. When we cleanse the temple and prepare it for God's glory by being brutally

honest and obedient, it will be said of us: “Zeal for the temple-house of the Lord has consumed them.”

When that happens, we will be ready for the miraculous to break out, just as it did after Jesus cleansed the Temple in His day. The presence of God will flood our temples, and His anointing will surge powerfully through cleansed vessels. This is what the Lord seeks—a clean house ready to be filled with His glory. Then He will release the greatest anointing of miracles, signs, and wonders this planet has ever seen!

The Lord is a jealous God, and He expects His people to live right because of it.²³⁰ He will not share us with other masters. He wants all of us for Himself.

The word *zeal* and its forms were used three times in Numbers 25:11; it stressed the concentrated passion a priest named Phinehas had for God and His covenant. Phinehas’ zeal paralleled God’s zeal, both for His covenant and the protection of the community from moral corruption.²³¹ When referring to God, zeal carries the force of His passionate resolve to preserve what is right for the benefit of the community. God has never lost His zeal and He expects His people to be powerfully moved by it. If we let it, it will transform us!

Paul had a divine jealousy or zeal²³² for the Church, for the purpose of presenting the Church to Jesus as a pure virgin. He wrote: “I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy [or zeal]; for I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2 Cor. 11:2 NASB).

This book is about the same zeal and jealousy for the Body of Christ. May His zeal in you be so stirred as to engulf you in the fire of the Holy Spirit.

Is Christianity Effortless?

“Oh, Brother Rodriguez, you just don’t understand. Christianity should be sweat-less under grace! The holiness, fear of the Lord, and keeping of the commandments that you espouse are not easy!”

²³⁰ See Deuteronomy 4:23-24; Hebrews 12:28-29.

²³¹ See *New English Bible* version and its notes on Numbers 25:11: <https://Lumina.bible.org/bible/Numbers+25>. See HALOT 2 זֵאֵל; BDB 888c; Strong’s H7065, 1a and 4.

²³² The same Greek word, *zeloo*, is used for both in the New Testament. See G2206.

I admit that holiness would be very hard—if we had no divine help from the Holy Spirit. But we do! He is called the Helper (see John 14:26). He helps us to live on His side, learning and walking in the fear of the Lord, and staying pure before Him. Yet He will not do *everything* for us. Generally, the Holy Spirit does not initiate the action of our obedience to the Word, though He encourages us to obey it. We do the Word and He backs us up, strengthening us to obey what He says. He does not control us. We start by faith (trust and obedience), and He supports us with His great grace (favor) and love.

Many who desire an effortless Christianity do so for the wrong reasons: they are spiritually lazy, lacking in heartfelt commitment, and would rather not have their endurance in the things of God tested.

We really must get this right! I urge you to read Luke 13:24; First Thessalonians 2:9; First Timothy 4:10; 6:12; and Romans 15:30 and then tell me whether you hear the slightest hint of “sitteth thou down and doeth nothing.” (You won’t!)

Two more portions of Scripture defy an effortless and sweat-less form of Christianity. Here is one:

You therefore, my child, be strengthened in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. The things which you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit the same to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. You therefore must endure hardship, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier on duty entangles himself in the affairs of life, that he may please him who enrolled him as a soldier. Also, if anyone competes in athletics, he isn’t crowned unless he has competed by the rules. The farmers who labor must be the first to get a share of the crops (2 Timothy 2:1-6 WEB).

Anyone who thinks athletic competition, the work of a farmer, or the duty of a soldier illustrates a sweat-less Christianity has never been involved in any of these activities! Notice how grace is mentioned in the very first verse. Paul teaches us how to be strengthened in the grace of Jesus by using terms such as *hardship, duty, competing as an athlete, competing by the rules, and labor*. Does that vocabulary point to effortlessness?

Paul lists activities that strengthen us. The truth is that no one in any worthy endeavor succeeds without breaking a sweat. Ask Olympic competitors who have to train and endure the rules and rigors of competition; or people in the military who are duty-bound to uphold their responsibilities (however demanding they may be) and please their commanders; or farmers who must do whatever it takes for however many long hours each day to produce good crops—ask them how their chosen fields of endeavor have made them tougher.

Paul compares these pursuits to being strengthened in grace. He never said it was effortless. His examples prove that sweat is part of the equation. If you are not yet convinced, check out what he said about his own walk:

Don't you know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run like that, that you may win. Every man who strives in the games exercises self-control in all things. Now they do it to receive a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. I therefore run like that, as not uncertainly. I fight like that, as not beating the air, but I beat my body and bring it into submission, lest by any means, after I have preached to others, I myself should be rejected (1 Corinthians 9:24-27 WEB).

Does running in a race, exercising self-control, fighting, and beating one's body into submission sound like a cakewalk to you? I can't imagine that it would!

Let's be truthful and admit that Christianity demands effort. Sometimes it demands blood, sweat, and tears. Paul suffered hardship; he and his peers worked very hard.²³³ Paul wrote that, while ministering to the Thessalonians, he worked and labored day and night to sustain himself without being a burden to them (see 1 Thess. 2:9).

A sweat-less, effortless brand of Christianity is as flaky as a snowstorm and as phony as a three-dollar bill! Real Christianity has a cost associated with it. Jesus talked about the cost in Luke 9 (vss. 23 and 57-62) and in Luke 14:25-35.

²³³ See Acts 18:3; 20:34-35; Romans 16:6, 12; First Corinthians 4:12.

“But Brother Rodriguez,” some will say, “you lack the revelation that we have. Grace makes no demands on us. And to believe that holiness and godliness are imperative is to place a burden on God’s people. You have a ‘works mentality’ that will put us in bondage.”

Say what you will, I am not beating the air. I am following Scripture. Unless revelation is scriptural and in context, it is worthless. Only the truth will stand firm—whether it is a truth we like or not.

The Commandments Are Not Burdensome

Keeping the commandments of the Lord and walking in righteousness and true holiness are never burdensome. Jesus said His burden is light and His yoke is easy (see Matt. 11:28-30). It is certainly easier than going to hell!

It is important to understand that Jesus’ statement does not mean there is no effort involved in following Him. Yet, when you are living right, in fellowship with Him, serving Him is a pleasure and a privilege. You can never consider it burdensome even when working day and night, as Paul often did. Such a “burden” can be borne because of love:

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. His commandments are not grievous [i.e., not severe, stern, cruel, unsparing, burdensome] (1 John 5:2-3 WEB).

His commandments are never burdensome when we do all as unto the Lord.

Whatever you do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father, through him (Colossians 3:17).

As servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord... (Ephesians 6:6-7).

There is an amazing beauty to living a holy and undefiled Christian life, because you love the Lord and yearn to do His will. It is precious beyond words, and it touches the heart of God. When He sees your desire to please Him in word and deed, He wants to visit you, talk to you, be your friend, and share with you things to come (see John 16:13).

The unholy and defiled Christian who refuses to repent and change does not enjoy such privileges. Fellowship is for those who can commune with the Holy Spirit. They recognize His holiness as His very nature and desire to follow Him in it. His purity becomes the desire of their lives. They want His holiness to permeate every fiber of their being.

Boldness to Enter into the Holy Place

We have been given a glorious invitation—to enter the holy place and worship Him in the beauty of holiness. We enter this fellowship by the blood of Jesus that made a way for us.

Having therefore, brothers, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus...let's draw near with a true heart in fullness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and having our body washed with pure water...²³⁴ (Hebrews 10:19, 22 WEB).

We have the right to enter into God's holy place *because* of Jesus' blood, but verse 22 lays down the requirements: we must cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of flesh and spirit, and cleanse our hands from a double-minded lifestyle (see 2 Cor. 7:1; James 4:4-10).

David wrote: "I maintain a pure lifestyle so I can appear before your altar, O LORD..." (Ps. 26:6 NET).²³⁵ David understood the requirements of entry into the holy place. We cannot expect to enter if we are actively partnering with darkness, fellowshiping with lawlessness, or in agreement with the devil and idols. We are required to come out of the world's ways, be separate, and not touch what is unclean. Then God can actively be a Father to us and we can fellowship with Him as His sons and daughters. (I just paraphrased for you some of Second Corinthians 6:14-18.)

234 Compare to Psalms 26:6; 51:7; 17-19 in the NET version. When a blood sacrifice was offered, the offering was accepted when people had a right heart and were living a right manner of life according to the covenant. We have the sacrifice of Jesus and His blood today, but we must honor His sacrifice and blood by coming before God with a pure heart and a by living a life that honors what He did for us. The prerequisites are humility and repentance.

235 See also Psalms 43:3-4.

Unholy living, whether inside the heart or outside in the body, cannot approach God in His holiness. But His holy blood is available to cleanse away our unrighteousness and make us pure in His sight so we can fellowship with Him.

If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in the darkness [sin, impurity, defilement, and unrighteousness], we lie, and do not tell the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:6-10).

If we will repent, confess our sins, and put our trust in what Jesus did, we can once again be pure and undefiled, free to enter into the holiest place of heaven through His blood. Thank God that His blood *never* loses its power to deliver, cleanse, and purify us!

As His holy temples, we must do our part to remain pure. He is always faithful to do His.

Loving the Lord Jesus

In First Corinthians 16:22 the apostle Paul delivered a warning: “If any man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed....” In case you think the translation is suspect, here are two others: “If anyone doesn’t love the Lord, let him be cursed!...” (GW). “If anyone does not love the Lord, that person is cursed...” (NLT).

Ouch! Paul made it abundantly clear that Christians must understand what it means to love the Lord. Paul was speaking to born-again, blood bought, tongue-talking believers. Yet he said they would be cursed if they failed to love Jesus Christ. He certainly put the Church on notice!

Though Paul’s warning seems strongly negative, it addresses a powerful truth with which we ought to be familiar. Clearly some in the Body of Christ are not; Paul’s assertion contradicts some modern doctrinal ideas that have veered light years away from the truth. Paul wrote his warning in definite terms. The person who does not love the Lord is cursed.

The Greek word translated “love” in First Corinthians 16:22 is *phileo*. It is generally taught that this word refers to brotherly love on a lower, human level. It is contrasted with *agape* (agapáo), which is presented as God’s higher form of love.

This idea is popular, but inaccurate.

Vine’s Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words states that *phileo*...

is to be distinguished from **agapao** in this, that **phileo** more nearly represents “tender affection.” The two words are used for the “love” of the Father for the Son, [John] 3:35 [*agape*], and [John] 5:20, [*phileo*]; for the believer, [John] 14:21 [*agape*] and [John] 16:27 [*phileo*]; both, of Christ’s “love” for a certain disciple, [John] 13:23 [*agape*], and [John] 20:2 [*phileo*]....The use of **phileo** in Peter’s answers and the Lord’s third question [John 21:17] conveys the thought of cherishing the Object above

all else, of manifesting an affection characterized by constancy, from the motive of the highest veneration.²³⁶

God Himself has both *phileo* (for the human race and for the Son) and *agape*. My point is that *phileo* is not a lesser love; it simply deals more with the affections and motivations of the heart, expressed outwardly in love and devotion. For example, we display loyalty and honor when we act in *phileo* toward the Lord.

In regard to Paul's statement about loving God, we are to cherish the Lord above everything and everyone. Jesus gets the preeminence; He is to occupy first place, but our affection in this way is to be constant or steadfast. This is one way of describing *emunah*, the Hebrew word for faith.²³⁷ It is birthed in the motive of holding the Lord in the highest esteem, honoring him above all else, and doing that on a consistent basis.

Vine describes *phileo* as cherishing the Lord above all else "from the motive of the highest veneration." Veneration is a synonym for reverence, honor, and great respect. These also describe the fear of the Lord. Our love for God comes from a deep respect, honor, reverence, awe, and a high esteem for Him. These are the basic meanings of *fear* when used in reference to God.

Paul was telling the Corinthians to hold the Lord is the highest esteem and reverence, because letting their love slip could lead to being "accursed." This means that we cannot show disrespect and dishonor for God by living sloppy Christian lives conducted irrespective of God's Word and commands, and expecting to partake of His blessings. Dishonor (despising) for God and the Lord Jesus will get dishonor (despising). Demonstrating honor for the Lord will get honor from Him. This principle is revealed in a very powerful verse: "For those who honor me [God] I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed" (1 Sam. 2:30b WEB).

236 *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, s.v. "love" (G5368).

237 BDB (H530) states that *emunah* means: firmness, fidelity, steadfastness, and steadiness. These meanings are exactly what Paul had in mind! The apostle used the word *faith* with these meanings because, as an example, he quotes Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17. In Hebrew the word for *faith* in Hab. 2:4 is *emunah*! (He was not thinking about faith as believing or our Christian beliefs, as is generally understood and taught in much of Christendom.) These are important words with powerful definitions when taken into account concerning our relationship-fellowship with the Lord. They define real bible faith. Take the word *fidelity* as an example. Synonyms are: adhesion, allegiance, attachment, commitment, constancy, dedication, devotedness, devotion, faith, faithfulness, fastness, fealty, loyalty, piety, steadfastness, and troth. See Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2014, s.v. "fidelity," <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fidelity> (accessed Dec. 4, 2014). After you finish looking up the meaning of all these words in Merriam-Webster, read the enlightening synonym discussion given for *fidelity*. Then proceed to apply these to your Christian life and your relationship-fellowship with the Lord Jesus! Are you looking in the mirror? Do these synonyms describe you in the Lord?

To despise²³⁸ is to disregard and have a low esteem of someone, in this case, God. It is the opposite of *phileo*; it does not consider or value His Word, commands, or will. The first use of this word in the Old Testament Hebrew text is in Genesis 25:34. It describes Esau rejecting and despising his blessing and inheritance for a pot of soup. Esau had such little esteem for the heritage of the blessing of God upon Abraham and Isaac, that a pot of soup seemed more valuable to him (see Heb. 12:16-17). Because of this (and when he later wanted to inherit the blessing) he was rejected.

One way for a New Testament believer to dishonor and lightly esteem the Lord Jesus is to see little worth in His sacrifice on the cross. Some in the Corinthian church did that by partaking unworthily of the table of the Lord. They disregarded Jesus' sacrifice by treating the Lord's Supper as a mundane thing. They did not understand that they were to partake of the benefits of His sacrifice by faith-faithfulness in what He did and provided for them through His body and blood. When they partook of the elements from the communion table, they did not honor the memory or meaning of the Lord's death. They forgot the everlasting covenant in His blood. It cost them the curse of premature death, sickness, and weakness (see 1 Cor. 11:25-30).

Honoring and respecting the Lord and His Word, cherishing what He did for us, and living in a way that honors and pleases Him have the opposite effect. These godly responses bring God's blessing and honor into manifestation!

We either honor and respect or despise and reject God. To *phileo* the Lord is the opposite of despising or rejecting Him. Despising Him in any way prevents our being blessed! This fact should be obvious, but in today's society, and because of false ideas about grace running rampant in the Church, it is necessary to strongly emphasize it.

There is no pretending in regard to our *phileo* of the Lord Jesus. The Lord sees the motivation, intention, and the cherishing of the heart. To pretend honor and respect is hypocrisy. Honoring God with the lips and not from the obedient heart of love and respectful reverence was something Jesus spoke against harshly (see Mark 7:6-8).

238 In the Hebrew, *bazah*—BDB 102b; Strong's H959; HALOT see בָּזָה.

Before we move on, it is worth noting the strong connection between Paul’s words and those of an Old Testament prophet. Let’s take a look at both:

“If any man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed...”
(1 Corinthians 16:22).

Those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed (1 Samuel 2:30b).

The Hebrew word translated “lightly esteem” is elsewhere often translated as “accursed” or “to curse.”²³⁹ The *New American Standard Bible* translates it that way a few dozen times. Paul probably had First Samuel 2:30 in mind when he penned First Corinthians 16:22. I propose my expanded translation (DARET) of the latter based on our study and the connection to First Samuel 2:30:

Anyone who does not respect (trust and obey the Lord willingly and from a heart motivated by love and high esteem), honor, show reverence for and to the Lord, will be rejected, lightly esteemed, and cursed for considering Him, His Word, and His will as having no value and being worthless.

I trust this study will encourage you to live wholeheartedly for the Lord with obedience to His Word. He is worth more than words can express. We should continually give Him our unwavering respect and reverential fear. These should be governing principles in our lives. They are eternal principles that will not fade or pass away.

Faithful and Devoted to the Lord

Being faithful and devoted to the Lord with our entire lives is what it means to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (see Matt. 22:37). Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5, but the surrounding verses are important and open our eyes to the meaning of loving God. Deuteronomy 6:4-19 begins with the greatest commandment (quoted by Jesus), speaks of obedience to all of God’s commandments, talks about the fear of the Lord, warns against serving other gods, and warns against disobedience.

239 In the Hebrew, *qalal*—BDB 886b; Strong’s H7043.

We cannot love or be faithful to two masters. We cannot be loyal to God while honoring anything of the devil. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, if we love one, we will despise the other. We simply cannot serve two masters, although some try. Try as they might, it is impossible to serve sin and unrighteousness *and* also serve purity and righteousness. We cannot be holy and unholy at the same time. We cannot call ourselves righteous while practicing unrighteousness. One will negate the other.²⁴⁰ These two will never, and can never, cohabit the same vessel for long. One will eventually become master over the other.²⁴¹

On many fronts, the words of Jesus in the Gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are minimized, and even rejected as “law” instead of grace. Proponents of this idea are not loving and honoring the Lord. Let us never be like those who despise and dishonor the Lord Jesus. We should reject the idea that His teachings in the Gospels don’t apply to us under grace. Why? Because Jesus and Paul taught the following:

1. The Holy Spirit was to bring to our remembrance *everything* Jesus said to His followers (see John 14:26).
2. We were commanded to teach the nations everything He commanded us! (See Matthew 28:20.)
3. Paul told the church at Ephesus that even though they received the word of the grace of God that they were to remember the words of the Lord Jesus! (See Acts 20:32-35.)

We must treasure, not just the sacrifice of Jesus, but also His teachings and example of ministry and of obedience to the Father. We cannot treasure Him without also treasuring what He did and said. “Wherever your treasure is there will your heart be also” is a principle taught by the Lord (see Matt. 6:21; see also 6:24). We cannot say we love and are devoted to the Lord and at the same time reject or minimize His teachings, His ministry, and His words. Jesus said that *if* we loved Him, we would obey His

²⁴⁰ Please read First John 3:4-10 in the NASB or NKJV.

²⁴¹ See Second Corinthians 6:14-18; Romans 6:16-22. John and Paul taught the same thing.

commandments (see John 14:21-23). How can we do this and dishonor what He said in the Gospels?

Some reject the book of Revelation, saying it is not pertinent for believers today. Everything in that book is a revelation of Jesus Christ, the Anointed One, as the first sentence of the book says. There is a special blessing in the reading the words of that book (see Rev. 1:1-3). To reject any part of it is to reject the revelation of Jesus our Lord.

In Revelation chapters 2 and 3 we find the revelation of Jesus to seven churches in Asia Minor. These churches were made up of Gentile believers in Jesus. Jesus expected them to repent from the worldliness and sin they allowed to creep into their churches. As a matter of fact, the churches were told repeatedly, “Repent!” The Lord expected them to remove false teachings that led people to do things forbidden to believers. Some of the teachings led people into sexual sins and idolatrous practices. Do many in churches today need to repent of the same things? Do you need to repent? Are you looking in the mirror?

Again I say, to love the Lord means to honor and reverence Him and cherish Him above all else. To love the Lord also means that we obey Him and do His Word. The love we have for Him is characterized by our obedience. A Scripture passage mentioned earlier is fitting here:

Now by this we know that we have come to know God: if we keep his commandments. The one who says “I have come to know God” and yet does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in such a person. But whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has been perfected. By this we know that we are in him (1 John 2:3-5 NET).

You cannot even know the Lord unless you keep His commandments. It is no wonder that Satan has been working overtime to deceive many into casting off the commandments of God and the words of Jesus in the Gospels because they are “works of the law” or “under the law.” If you believe that, you do not and cannot know Him intimately. The Greek word translated “know” in First John 2:3 is based, in one form of

usage, on a Hebrew idiom expressing the most intimate contact between a married man and his wife.²⁴²

We are talking about a deep communion and intimacy with God that the outside world cannot understand or fathom. Even in the Church, many seek intimacy with God in other ways without keeping His commandments. Worship, “soaking” services, or considering Him alone will not get us acquainted intimately with God. We have to put first things first. *First* we must honor Him through obedience because we love Him from the heart. That is the foundation for any intimacy with Him!

Do you like to sing to the Lord? Do you enjoy worship? Singing worship songs can make you happy and emotionally gratified without bringing you anywhere near God. Worshippers living disobedient and rebellious lifestyles that violate the principles of God’s Word can forget intimacy. Worship and praise are powerful when done from a heart that truthfully loves Him—not just with words, but with the entire life.

We must grasp this truth! We Christians can lay hands on each other, pray in tongues for hours, prophesy, and still not know God intimately. Unless we become doers of His Word out of a motivation of love for Him and the Lord Jesus, we cannot know God deeply.

Two That Cannot Mix

God did not accept animal sacrifices from people who lived ungodly lifestyles in rebellion to His Word. Follow me in this. It grieved the Lord and often angered Him. God considered such sacrifices an abomination; they were polluted.²⁴³ To sum up the words of anointed prophets, the people of Israel were rebellious and full of iniquity. Yet they brought sacrifices to the Temple and tried to keep the feasts and festivals.

For example: Saul disobeyed the word of the Lord and attempted to use animal sacrifices to excuse his disobedience. God was not interested in such sacrifices or

242 Remember that to “know” or “have knowledge of God” is connected to being submitted to His will and obeying His commandments. To know God intimately is to obey Him consistently!

243 Four powerful examples of how much the Lord despised polluted sacrifices are found in First Samuel 15:22-23; Isaiah 1:2-20; Malachi 1:6-14; and Jeremiah 6:13-21.

excuses! In Saul's case and others, God's people tried to praise and worship Him through sacrifices combined with ungodliness. The two can never mix!

God repeatedly said that He hated the sacrifices offered by people who remained in sin and wickedness. It was vain, useless, and disgusting to Him. God despised polluted sacrifices. The sacrifices He wanted and accepted were done in righteousness, joy, and thanksgiving from humble and repentant hearts. (A humble and repentant heart is the meaning of "a broken and contrite heart or spirit."²⁴⁴)

Today we don't sacrifice animals because the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. More importantly, Jesus was the Lamb of God who performed the one-for-all sacrifice that never needs repeating (see Heb. 9:12). The sacrifice of Jesus rendered the old system of sacrifice, Temple, and priesthood obsolete, as Hebrews 7 through 10 explains in detail.

Now in Christ, we offer up spiritual sacrifices, the fruit of our lips, confessing His Name in worship and praise, preaching and teaching, ministering, service, doing good, and giving. These are our Christian and priestly sacrifices under the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus.²⁴⁵

So does God feel the same way about our sacrifices as He did in Saul's day? Does He reject Christian sacrifices from those who are involved in iniquity? Or has He changed His mind and decided that a mixture of sacrifices (worship) and ungodliness is now OK?

The question is settled in Scripture. God never changes and He is the same now as then! (See Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8.) He is still grieved and disgusted with this unholy mixture. It is an abomination to Him. Therefore, we should flee from disrespecting and dishonoring Him with it.

There is a holy combination for us: the connection between loving God and doing His commandments. Watch in the following scriptures how it perfectly agrees with what is taught in First John. As we have learned by building our case, line upon line and

²⁴⁴ See Psalms 4:5; 27:6; 51:17, 19; 107:22; Isaiah 56:7.

²⁴⁵ See First Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15-16; Philippians 2:17; 4:16-18; Romans 12:1.

precept upon precept from the Scripture, it is impossible to love God without being a doer of His moral commands.

Know therefore that the LORD your God, he is God, the faithful God, who keeps covenant and loving kindness with them who love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations, and repays those who hate him to their face, to destroy them: he will not be slack to him who hates him, he will repay him to his face. You shall therefore keep the commandment, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which I command you this day, to do them. It shall happen, because you listen to these ordinances, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the loving kindness which he swore to your fathers: and he will love you, and bless you, and multiply you...(Deuteronomy 7:9-13).

This idea is repeated often in Deuteronomy and elsewhere.²⁴⁶ If we love God, we will not spurn His moral commands.

Next is a passage I have referred to often. Jesus' own words cut through wrong ideas that disregard or minimize covenant obedience. He gets to the nitty-gritty of loving the Father and the Lord Jesus:

If you love me, you will obey my commandments....The person who has my commandments and obeys them is the one who loves me. The one who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and will reveal myself to him....If anyone loves me, he will obey my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and take up residence with him. The person who does not love me does not obey my words. And the word you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me (John 14:15, 21, 23-24 NET).

Real love for Jesus *cherishes* His words and commandments and obeys them! Living in these truths sets us up for a close and personal fellowship with the Master. Does the

²⁴⁶ See Deuteronomy 5:10; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9; 30:16. Another great example is in Exodus 20:6.

idea of being in His inner circle bless you? Do you desire that more than your next breath? Are you looking in the mirror?

The Message of God's Love

The scriptural message of God's love involves more than loving our brethren and neighbors as Jesus loved us (see John 13:34-35), and more than staying out of strife. These are a part of the love message, but they are not the whole message (see John 13:34-35).

The list below provides a more complete picture of love:

- Love means that we honor, reverence, respect, esteem, and obey the Lord, His Word, and His commandments. We delight in, and have a love for His Word and commandments. We have already seen many scriptures about this.²⁴⁷
- Love toward God means that we hate evil and walk in the fear the Lord.²⁴⁸
- Love means that when we are aware of a brother's or sister's need, we minister to them from our goods. Praying and "speaking by faith" are not enough when it is in our power to bless and help others. Faith-faithfulness works by love. These are part of God's love.²⁴⁹
- Love means refusing to show more or less respect to people based on whether they are rich or poor. We do not dishonor the poor and exalt the rich. We respect *all* people whether they are well dressed or wearing rags, whether they smell good or bad (see James 2:1-13).
- Because of love, and through it, we serve one another (see Gal. 5:13). This leaves out pride, rebellion, jealousy, and despising authority. Love includes humility, honor, respect, compassion, kindness, and seeking to be a blessing to others.

²⁴⁷ See Psalms 119:47-48; 127, 159, 167.

²⁴⁸ See Psalms 97:10; Proverbs 8:13.

²⁴⁹ See First John 3:17-19; James 2:14-17; Galatians 5:6.

▪ Love means giving to the work of the gospel and to anyone else the Lord asks us to bless. We give out of a sincere heart that proves His love in us and for others (see 2 Cor. 8:8, 24).

Tithing is essential; non-tithers are walking in covetousness and functioning outside the love of God (see Deut. 26; Heb. 7). Tithing has never been about giving to an organization or person. It is about honoring the Lord with the first fruits of our increase (see Prov. 3:9-10). God is the Lord of the tithe. He tells us where to put it, and He instructs His stewards in how to use it, according to Deuteronomy 26 and other verses on the subject.

We don't get to choose where to tithe. We should expect divine direction from the Lord for two reasons: (1) because we want the tithe to honor Him and (2) because it demonstrates our sincere love for Him. (Hopefully, your church is feeding you the Word uncompromisingly and is an example of faith-faithfulness, holiness, living according to God's Word, and ministering unselfishly to the needs of the people. If so, your church is worthy to receive your tithe.)

▪ Love means that we resist and refuse lawlessness (sin) and keep God's Word, because love is the sum total of His commandments (revealed and shed abroad by the Holy Spirit in our hearts). Walking in love is walking according to God's holy commandments.²⁵⁰

▪ Love means we are doers of God's Word, abiding in His love by keeping His commandments, which are summed up in love (see Rom. 13:9-11; John 15:10). Ignorance of God's commands causes our interpretation of love to be woefully weak and incomplete.²⁵¹

Overlooked Commandments in Love

²⁵⁰ See Romans 5:5; First John 3:4; Romans 13:9-11.

²⁵¹ See First John 2:4-5; James 1:22; John 15:10.

We can over-generalize the love commandment and miss important aspects of it. I don't want to do that. Here are some more often overlooked commands that are essential parts of God's love:

1. *Help orphans or the fatherless, the widow, and the stranger* who is, specifically but not exclusively, a brother or sister in the Lord.²⁵²
2. *Pay prompt wages to those you hire.* Never rob anyone's wages in any way.²⁵³
3. *Never visit soothsayers, those who practice divination, mediums, or spiritists.* This includes those who indulge in tarot cards, fortune telling, and horoscopes for prognosticating future events. It includes those who say they speak to the dead, and those who invoke any kind of magic.²⁵⁴
4. *Do not cut or tattoo your body* (see Lev. 19:28). The Hebrew word translated "tattoo" in some versions speaks about making an impression, imprint, inscription, or mark in the flesh or the body, as in a tattoo. What if you came to Jesus already tattooed? Your sins were forgiven when you received the new birth. Don't get any more tattoos or it will violate love—God's holy commandments. For some ungodly reason, tattoo parlors have become popular with young Christians. Getting a tattoo is not "body art." Nor is it a Christian activity by any stretch of the imagination. This might seem like a minor thing, but I include it because it is in the same context as loving your neighbor, honoring the elderly, staying away from occult practices, and so on. For the Lord, it is not a side issue.
5. *Honor elderly believers* (see Lev. 19:32; 1 Tim. 5:1-2).
6. *Do not hate in your heart a brother or sister in the Lord* (see Lev. 19:17; 1 John 3:15).

²⁵² See Deuteronomy 24:20-21; 26:12; First Timothy 5:3-16; and James 1:27.

²⁵³ See Leviticus 19:13; James 5.

²⁵⁴ See Leviticus 19:26, 31; Isaiah 47:13-14; Acts 16:16-18; 19:19; Galatians 5:20; Revelation 9:21.

7. *If you must rebuke someone because of their sin, do not incur sin because of them.*²⁵⁵

8. *Do not take vengeance or hold a grudge. Love others as you love yourself.*²⁵⁶

9. *Do no wrong in judgment, measurement, or capacity* (see Lev. 19:35-36; 1 Cor. 6:1-8). This forbids the bringing of unrighteous lawsuits in order to rob or take advantage of others. Some think it is all right to sue corporate giants because the coffee they sell is too hot! That is covetousness. Coffee is *supposed* to be hot! This commandment also orders us to be fair and honorable in business, not overcharging or otherwise cheating people. Making a profit on goods is acceptable and good, but price-gouging is theft.

Being originally from the island of Puerto Rico and having lived through numerous hurricanes, I can tell you something about price-gouging. Before and after storms, when the need is the greatest, prices for water, ice, food, and other essentials soar three to five times above normal rates. That is highway robbery—an evil act we should never undertake.

10. *Do not eat blood, things sacrificed to idols, animals strangled, animals not already drained of their blood.*²⁵⁷ (These are the only dietary laws that apply to Christians.)

This is a big deal for native Puerto Ricans and others who enjoy a nice, spicy blood sausage!²⁵⁸ It is against the commandments of God. Strangling a chicken and then eating it is forbidden. Unfortunately, in places like Puerto Rico, chickens are usually strangled and rabbits have their necks broken. This is eating an animal with its blood. Blood does not drain when an animal is

²⁵⁵ See Leviticus 19:17; Matthew 18:15-17; Galatians 6:1.

²⁵⁶ See Leviticus 19:18; Romans 12:17-20. This includes forgiveness and restoration. See Matthew 6:14-15; 18:21-35; Mark 11:25-26; Ephesians 4:32; Colossians 3:13.

²⁵⁷ See Leviticus 19:26; Acts 15:29. In Revelation 2:20, Jesus said He was against the false prophetess Jezebel that was leading God's servants to commit sexual immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. Therefore, we can assume that the Lord agreed with the decision of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15:29 requiring the Gentile converts to abstain from these things.

²⁵⁸ I was born, partly raised, and lived on the island for about 30 years.

killed in these ways. Kosher meats come from animals that died quickly when their throats were slit. The meat is processed to remove as much blood possible. I am not suggesting that Christians go kosher; I am referring to a real commandment that many have ignored.

11. *Do not eat things sacrificed to idols* (see 1 Cor. 8:1-13; Acts 15:29). At one time, I worked at a jewelry store on the island of Saint Thomas. A Hindu coworker brought sweets for everyone at the store. Everybody ate them but me. Hindus ate the pastries to honor one of their gods. The woman made the mistake of asking why I declined her pastries. She was clearly offended when I told her that it was forbidden for me as a Christian to participate in festivals and foods offered to other gods. I told her that I worshipped Jehovah, the one and only true God of the Bible, and His Son Jesus. She got very angry, but I stood my ground for Jesus—not rudely or meanly, but in truth!

Paul was very clear that we are not to bow down to those who worship other gods or show any honor or respect for their gods and their religions. Though this is politically incorrect, it is the unvarnished Christian truth.

12. *Do not have sex with those prohibited.*²⁵⁹ The word *fornication* includes sex between any blood-related people, same-gender sexual contact (homosexuality and lesbianism), all idolatrous sexual practices, sex with animals, and prostitution. God says these practices are: abominations, abominable customs of the heathens, defilement, under a curse (cut off from the people), and subject to God’s judgment.²⁶⁰ Of course, having sex with someone else’s spouse (adultery) is a very serious sin, and it is under God’s judgment as stated in Leviticus 20:10 (and following). Sex was always to be contained, maintained, and regulated inside the marriage covenant between one man and one woman. There were never accepted sexual relations outside of marriage. Period! Today, sexual encounters outside of marriage and

²⁵⁹ Study Leviticus 18:1-30; 20:10-21.

²⁶⁰ See also First Corinthians 5:1-5; 6:9-10; 13-20.

homosexual marriage are the subject of sitcoms! They by no means represent the modern family. They are the result of lawlessness invading the land!

Rooted and Grounded in Love

Paul taught that we are to be rooted and grounded in love (see Eph. 3:17). But for many the expression of love is limited to staying out of strife, forgiving, and being kind to others. These are highly commendable. They are a part of the love equation, but form an incomplete representation of love. Love is a much broader subject than has been usually taught. I believe the list we just examined covers some things not usually thought to be associated with the practice of love.

For many, First Corinthians 13 covers all there is to love. However, Paul was not teaching on the entire scope of love in that chapter. Nor does the chapter stand alone. It is sandwiched between chapters 12 and 14 and refers to love in relation to the gifts and ministries of the Holy Spirit.

To First Corinthians 13 we must add Paul's own definition of love stated in Romans 13:9-11. We must also examine the mention of love in other verses and epistles including First John chapters 2 through 5. To correctly understand the scope of love, we must also explore the teachings of James and Jude.

Being rooted and grounded in love involves loving your neighbor as yourself. It includes the love *of* God and *toward* Him as expressed through obedience, faithfulness, devotion, reverence, and honor for God's Word and commandments (see Eph. 6:24; 1 John 2:3-6). We are to cherish and esteem the Lord by honoring and deeply respecting Him (*phileo*), and we are to love (*agapáo*) Him.

The Truth about Unconditional Love

Here is something that may come as a shock because of the usual teaching and preaching on *unconditional love*. Most Christians have somewhat misunderstood the Greek noun *agape* and the verb *agapáo*. These are often interpreted as *unconditional love*—love that is available regardless of our actions and words. In the sense that God's love is always available, that is true. But neither word includes the idea that this God kind

of love manifests even if when we continue sinning without repenting or confessing our sin.

If that were true, then universalism and its claims would be valid. (Universalism teaches that at the end of time everybody will be saved and enjoy future bliss because God's love is unconditional.) For the universalist, the "love of God" insinuates that God overlooks all sin and evil because there is going to be a "reconciliation of all things."

Universalism is a distortion of the truth and a grave deception. Both the Old and New Testaments present a clear doctrine of the eternal damnation of the wicked, a truth denied by universalism as taught in some cults and in other heathen religions. In Hebrews 6:1-2, eternal judgment is presented as a foundational doctrine of the Church. The book of Revelation records the future bliss of the righteous in heaven, and in the new heavens and new earth. It also reveals the eternal abode for the wicked.

Here then is my question: "Is the love of God unconditional for those who go to hell, and for those who will have their part in the lake of fire?" The answer is No! They have cut themselves off from the manifestation of God's love.

Many have taught that people don't go to hell for the sins they have committed, but for their rejection of Jesus. That is ultimately true, but the Bible tells us that on Judgment Day two sets of books will be opened. One is the Book of Life. Those whose names are not found in it will be cast into the lake of fire. The other is a record of the works people did, whether good or evil.²⁶¹ The information in these books will be the criteria by which every human being is judged.

Consider the following scripture, paying close attention to the fact that *unbelievers* get separate mention as having a part in the lake of fire.

But for the cowardly, unbelieving, sinners, abominable, murderers, sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, have their part in the

²⁶¹ See Revelation 20:12-15; 21:8; Second Thessalonians 1:7-10. Paul states that even believers will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account of what they did in their own bodies, whether good or evil (see 2 Cor. 5:10). Some have the idea that the works you do in your body don't matter in Christ or that they are of little consequence, either positively or negatively. How wrong they are!

lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death (Revelation 21:8 WEB).

The lake of fire is reserved for all those living in or practicing the listed categories of sins. It is also the final destination for the *unbeliever* who refused God's free gift of salvation in Christ Jesus. Human beings can, and often do, reject the love of God. When they go to hell and the lake of fire, it is not because some external force or obstacle separated them from God's love. They chose to reject it, as a matter of their will.

A popular Christian song quotes Paul's statements in Romans 8 (vss. 35 and 39) that nothing can separate us from the love of God. That is true. Nothing on this earth can separate us from His love. But Paul left out one "thing"—*we can choose to separate ourselves from God's love*. Those who will go to hell and the lake of fire are the proof, not because God did not love them, but because they chose to reject His requirements—His love plan for humanity.

The ultimate choice belongs to each human being. We choose where we will spend eternity. The choice must be made before physical death. Once we depart this earth through physical death, we enter the judgment we have arranged for ourselves.²⁶²

Here is an excerpt from the *Vine's Expository Dictionary* entry for the word *love* as used in the New Testament:

Love had its perfect expression among men in the Lord Jesus Christ, 2 Cor. 5:14; Eph. 2:4; 3:19; 5:2; Christian love is the fruit of His Spirit in the Christian, Gal. 5:22. *Christian love has God for its primary object, and expresses itself first of all in implicit obedience to His commandments, John 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 John 2:5; 5:3; 2 John 6. Self-will, that is, self-pleasing, is the negation of love to God.* Christian love, whether exercised toward the brethren, or toward men generally, is not an impulse from the feelings, it does not always run with the natural inclinations, nor does it spend itself only upon those for whom some affinity is discovered. Love seeks the welfare of all, Rom. 15:2, and works no ill to any, 13:8, 9,

²⁶² Hebrews 9:27—This is true even though they will have to go through the final judgment before the throne of God.

10; love seeks opportunity to do good to “all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith,” Gal. 6:10. See further 1 Corinthians 13 and Col. 3:12-14²⁶³ (emphasis mine).

Notice what I italicized and how it clarifies the love of God. Vine provides a catalog of scriptures proving his point about the expression of love through obedience to God’s commands.²⁶⁴ Vine says that *agape* love “expresses itself first of all in implicit obedience to His commandments.” Vine lists seven New Testament references, but there are more. First John 2:5 teaches that *if* we keep, do, or obey His Word, then the love *of* God is matured (perfected) in us.

Isn’t that exactly what Jesus said in John 14:15, 21, and 23-24? These verses reveal in no uncertain terms that obedience to the Lord’s commandments shows our love for Him and the Father, and obedience to His commands opens the door for *manifestation of* His love toward us. His love, though available to everybody on the planet, is not *manifested* toward the disobedient and rebellious. It is available, but *not manifested!*

Even John 3:16 demands a response from those who want to participate in God’s demonstrated love for the whole world by the sacrifice of Jesus.²⁶⁵ God sent Jesus to pay the penalty for guilty humanity, but only those who believe it and receive it enjoy its benefits. Despite Jesus’ sacrifice, those who do not believe (trust and obey) and receive it will perish. So Jesus commanded the Church to preach the gospel to every creature. Those who believe it (in Greek, conveying also trust, faithfulness, and obedience) will be saved, and those who do not believe it (*i.e.*, are faithless, betraying of a trust, unfaithful) will be condemned (judged worthy of punishment).²⁶⁶ This should be quite obvious, but strange and unfruitful doctrines concerning “unconditional love and grace” are causing many to turn away from the truth and believe fables.

Some say that Jesus or Paul coined the word *agape*, but the word was used among the Greeks for centuries before Jesus used it. Both the noun and verb were used in the

263 See Vine’s, s.v. “love.”

264 I urge you to study the scriptures listed in the *Vine’s* excerpt, including the John 14 passage I provided.

265 See also Romans 5:8; First John 4:9-10.

266 See Mark 16:16.

Septuagint three hundred years before Jesus. And when the apostle Paul quoted Leviticus 19:18 in Romans 13:9 (“love your neighbor as yourself”), he quoted from the Septuagint.

The Hebrew word for “love” is *ahab*, a covenant term when used in relation to the love of God for us and our love for God and His commandments.²⁶⁷ Because it is covenantal, the manifestation of *ahab* is never one-sided! Our side is a reverential love that is obedient and loyal and based on the covenant of God.²⁶⁸

Love signifies that we are lovers of God and His Word. We demonstrate it by loyalty and faithfulness to His dictates, teachings, orders, commandments, and words. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and John 14:21-23 are mighty witnesses to this eternal truth. To love God in the Hebrew language indicates that we are obedient and faithful to the Lord with *all* our spirit, soul, body—all we possess, and all we are.²⁶⁹

Disloyalty and unfaithfulness to Him and His words are out of the question *because we love Him*. We reverence, respect, and honor Him so much that we refuse to do anything that displeases Him; we are faithful to do only what pleases our Lord. We want to please Him. We desire to honor Him. We are zealous to live for Him. We are in love with Him and His Word. That is real and true love! That is love according to God’s Word.

God’s Divorce

The unfaithful and disobedient do not love God or His Word. Instead, they oppose His covenant. Israel was so unfaithful and disloyal and prone to serving false gods that God ended up divorcing them. Study the books of Hosea and Jeremiah. Disobedience, treachery, harlotry, and unfaithfulness became so pronounced among God’s people, that He could no longer stand their wicked ways. He said to them, “I had sent her [Israel] away and given her a writ of divorce...” (Jer. 3:8 NASB).

267 Lumina NET at Bible.org. Deuteronomy 6:5, in note 8 explains that love (as used in this verse), refers to covenant commitment, that is, “to be absolutely loyal and obedient to Him in every respect, a truth Jesus himself taught (cf. John 14:15).” See <https://lumina.bible.org/bible/Deuteronomy+6> (accessed September 13, 2014).

268 *Ahab* is related to the covenant when it refers to our relationship-fellowship with God. God commands us to have this kind of love toward Him (see Deut. 6:5; 10:12; 11:1, 13, 22; 13:4; 19:9; 30:6, 16, 20). This love is intimately related to fear and reverence; it is expressed through obedience, loyalty to God, walking in His ways, keeping His commandments, giving heed to His voice, and serving Him. It is a love defined by covenant! See also *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 11:525, s.v. “love.”

269 See Deuteronomy 6:1-15; 7:9-11; 28:1-2, 13, 14, and all of chapter 30 to name a few references. This principle exists throughout the Word of God, from Genesis to Revelation: love and obey Him faithfully and live; but disobey or be disloyal and unfaithful to Him, and get death!

Even though God hates divorce (see Mal. 2:16), chronic treachery and rebellion left Him no option but to divorce an entire generation of His people. After the children of Israel refused to go into the Promised Land because of fear, rebellion, and unbelief, God waited forty years for the entire adult generation that left Egypt to die in the wilderness.²⁷⁰ Apart from Joshua and Caleb none of the Israelites who began the trip made it to the land of promise. Only their children did.

Jesus said that believers should not divorce except for the cause of immorality (see Matt. 19:9).²⁷¹ Some Christians who violated their covenant of marriage through fornication and adultery have received forgiveness from their spouses, and have been taken back into relationship. This is honorable! Jesus did not say we were obligated to divorce in the case of immorality, but that it was an acceptable option in such cases. Thank God for those who have the spiritual fortitude and pure gumption to push through the betrayal and treason resulting from unfaithfulness.

God has done the same for those that repent! He forgives betrayal and treason and restores those that repent and change. Nevertheless, God severed a very bad marriage to some of the generations of His people, Israel because of their persistent rebellion and treachery. This tells me that the circumstances surrounding infidelity can sometimes make divorce unavoidable, especially when people refuse to repent. Divorce is not God's best generally speaking, but there are exceptions. Sometimes divorce is absolutely necessary according to the apostle Paul (see 1 Cor. 7:12-16). No woman should live in an abusive situation. God has called us to peace; getting beat up by a demon-inspired abuser is not peace!

This discussion of marriage and divorce is about covenant. Do you understand that marriage is based on a covenant and that vows are exchanged? (See Malachi 2:14.) Both spouses have responsibilities and are accountable for keeping their vows. Covenant *always* demands the participation of both sides.

²⁷⁰ See Hebrews chapters 3 and 4; Numbers chapters 13 and 14.

²⁷¹ Immorality or fornication, cited by Jesus in Matthew 19:9 as grounds for divorce, is from the Greek word *porneia*. It includes all kinds of illicit sexual intercourse. (See Thayer's coded to Strong's G4202—*porneia* refers to "illicit sexual intercourse in general"; therefore it includes adultery, fornication, homosexuality, lesbianism, intercourse with animals, and more.) This word also includes the spiritual adulterer and fornicator who abandons the Lord and lives once again for the devil. It can be used to describe the apostate. In Scripture, the Lord considered the apostate an adulterer and a fornicator. I must add that the vice of pornography is included in this definition, though indirectly. The word pornography is based on this Greek word *porneia*.

Covenantally speaking, the relationship between the Father and the believer in Christ Jesus is no different. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have a part to play; the believer also has responsibilities and is held accountable for them.

Why has this been so hard for people to accept? I believe the reason is simple: it is a lot easier to believe that we can leave it all up to God and not bear the weight of any covenant responsibilities. It is easier to think that we can “just believe.”

No sir, and no ma’am! That is not how covenant works. Yes, it grants us rights and privileges, but it demands from us commitment, obligation, responsibility, and accountability, too.

There Can Be Only One Master

Does *agape* refer only to the God kind of love? Did you know that it is possible to agape the world and the things in it, and even darkness?²⁷² We can *agape* God or mammon.²⁷³ We must choose whom we will love.

*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be **loyal** to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon²⁷⁴ (Matthew 6:24 NKJV).*

To *agape* God or mammon is to serve, be devoted to, or be loyal to one or the other. Some translations render the Greek as “devoted,” “respect,” “attach yourself to,” “hold to,” or “cleave to.”²⁷⁵ The word *agape* is directly connected to service,²⁷⁶ loyalty, respect, and devotion.

Agape toward God is respect for Him with submission to His will and a yielded obedience in loyalty that cleaves to Him! How do you like that powerful definition

272 See First John 2:15; John 3:19.

273 See Matthew 6:24. I am using the Greek word *agape* as a noun, even though in these places it is the verb *agapáo*. I do this because *agape* is the most familiar and most quoted word for “love” in Christendom.

274 See Strong’s G3126: *mammon* is a word borrowed from the Aramaic and refers to “wealth personified” and “avarice (deified).” Thayer’s says it is “personified and opposed to God.” Jesus used the word to refer to wealth and possessions that are used wrongly and given precedence over God and His Word. It means that money becomes one’s god. Though this is true, money is not inherently evil as some have wrongly believed. Money is often used for evil, but it can and should be used for good. See First Timothy 6:6-10; and 6:17-19.

275 In the Greek, *antechomai*. See Thayer’s G472.

276 “Serve” in Matthew 6:24 is *douleuo* (G1398), meaning “to yield obedience,” according to Thayer’s.

gleaned from the words of Jesus? (I like the phrase “cleaves to Him” because it reminds me of Deuteronomy 30:19-20. Please read it.)

Unconditional love is usually taught in ways that suggest that God winks at evil, especially in the lives of Christians. The only way that God can ignore evil is if a sinner repents of it and comes to Jesus. When a Christian does evil, God expects repentance and confession leading to cleansing from whatever sin and unrighteousness was committed. Under grace in Christ, the wages of sin are still death (see Rom. 6:23). That will not change. Sin deserves and carries a death sentence with it. That is why believers must not live in sin—not if they want life and blessing.

As we stated repeatedly, if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us (see 1 John 1:9). What happens if we do not confess our sins? Does the Lord just forgive us anyway? If we sin as born-again Christians, but refuse to repent and confess our sins, does the Lord just forgive us anyway? Forgiveness is not automatic, according to this conditional statement from John’s writings. John’s thought in verse 9 is predicated on the condition described in verse 7: *If we walk in the light as He is in the light, then His blood cleanses us from all sin.*²⁷⁷

Let me approach the close of this book by stating what I did at the start: God is good! His love and mercy are eternal. They are always available to anyone regardless of their sin, *if* they repent and receive them as free gifts from the Lord. God will not force us to receive them. He has mercy on our ignorance and mistakes. If He didn’t, we would all be in a mess. We can always come to the throne of His divine favor and obtain mercy and find favor to help in the time of need (see Heb. 4:16).

Thank God for His eternal mercy. I have received His mercy when I messed up big time. If I had gotten what I deserved, I would already be in hell, but He had mercy on me because I came to Him in repentance, confessed my sins, and received it.

God always makes His favor (grace) available to the humble (see 1 Pet. 5:5). Humility is shown when we repent, confess our sins, and walk in the light of what we

²⁷⁷ That tells us that we are only responsible for what we know we should do, and we are not responsible for what we do not know. God will not call us to account over what we do not know (see James 4:17).

know. These are paramount to staying within the boundaries of His eternal favor (grace), mercy, and love.

Favor, mercy, and love depend on our response to His covenant Word. If we continue in faith and love, then we have His favor (see Col. 1:22-23). If we step out of the boundaries of the covenant through unbelief or rebellion, then His love cannot manifest toward us until we repent.²⁷⁸ This has been true of any covenant of God. Covenant always demands reciprocal responsibilities and accountability. We enter the New Covenant in the blood of Jesus through the new birth; but the covenant is a two-way street. God did His part through Jesus; now He expects us to fulfill our part as His sons and daughters.²⁷⁹

If this book had a thousand pages, we might scratch the surface of the mighty subjects presented. My hope, dear reader, is that the right scriptural references and anointed words have been shared with you to prepare the way for the Holy Spirit to light a divine zeal and a holy fire in your heart.

I trust Him that you will never be the same!

²⁷⁸ See Hebrews 3:12-19; 4:1-3; John 14:21-23; Proverbs 28:13.

²⁷⁹ See First Peter 1:13-25; 2:8-16; 4:1-11; Galatians 5:13-26; 6:7-8; First Thessalonians 4:1-12; First Corinthians 5:1-13; 6:12-20; Titus 2:1-15; Romans 6:12-23. The responsibility and accountability of all believers for their actions is recorded throughout the New Testament, including in every epistle written by the apostle Paul. Over and over, Paul teaches the Gentile churches about their responsibility to live holy lives.

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This is not an exhaustive list of sources used, but they are the main ones. I hope this list moves you into deeper study of God's Word.

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