

RENEWING
VIR  UE
COURAGE PRUDENCE TEMPERANCE JUSTICE FAITH HOPE LOVE



T. M. Moore

Renewing Virtue

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Foreword

Welcome to *Renewing Virtue*, a study devoted to refocusing on the characteristics of godliness, holiness, and love which are the distinguishing marks of the followers of Jesus Christ.

This course is divided into eight sections, as follows:

1. The Need for Renewing Virtue (pages 5-21)
This lesson offers a look at our age of pragmatism and relativism through the lens of the Book of Judges.
2. Courage (pages 22-38)
All true Christian virtues are a work of the Spirit of God, beginning in our hearts, where we gain the courage to live for Christ in a pragmatic and relativistic age.
3. Prudence (pages 39-55)
In one of his best books, Chuck Colson asked the question, "How Now Shall We Live?" The answer is to embrace a Christian worldview and the life of wisdom it entails. In this section we'll see what we can learn from Solomon about increasing in prudence, or, wisdom.
4. Temperance (pages 56-72)
The enemy of our souls will seek to frustrate our pursuit of virtue. We must learn to recognize his wiles and ways so that we can grow through temptation into greater maturity in the Lord. This requires the virtue of temperance, or, self-control.
5. Justice (pages 73-89)
Justice is simply the character of God lived out in human society. Biblical justice is a gem of five facets, which we can learn to practice in everyday situations.
6. Faith (pages 90-106)
Faith, the writer of Hebrews insists, involves assurance, hope, and evidence. If we truly have faith, it will show in our lives.
7. Hope (pages 107-123)
We have heard a good bit these days about "hope and change." We keep hoping for the change, but it's hard to find. We need to make sure we understand hope and how it works – and what we should really be hoping to attain.
8. Love (pages 124-140)
The greatest and most abiding of the Christian virtues is love, because love most reflects the character of God Himself. We can grow in our ability to love God and our neighbors, but we'll have to work at it.

Each of the eight lessons in this series is divided into seven days of reading and reflecting. Read the lessons for each day and work through the questions for reflection and the "next steps" exercises. We also encourage you to consult some of the additional resources provided at the end of each lesson, to help you grow in the virtues even more. If you're working from the PDF version of this study, simply click the links provided. Or you can go to colsoncenter.org and type the article title into the search box labeled: "Search Colson Library."

At the end of each lesson, additional action steps and a "conversation starter" are provided to help you put your learning into practice right away.

When your group comes together, you will watch a brief video on the topic of the week. Your presenters will be Colson Center founder Chuck Colson, together with Dr. Timothy George and John Stonestreet. Then your group leader will lead you in a lively discussion, based on your daily reading and reflections. This will

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give you an opportunity to share what you have been learning and to encourage one another in renewing virtue in your lives. If you have prepared well, letting the daily lessons settle in your soul, you should be able to make a valuable contribution to the learning experience of your group (Col 3:16).

Take your time, work a little each day, and make the most of every opportunity to apply what you are learning to your daily life (Eph. 5:15-17). Be sure to pray for yourself and the members of your group, that God might work mightily in you to renew your commitment to growing in Christian virtue.

We think you'll find this to be a challenging and rewarding study.

T. M. Moore

The Need for Renewing Virtue

Re-moralizing Society

Coarse, crude, uncivil, violent, narcissistic, uncompassionate – these are some of the adjectives I frequently encounter as I read articles describing the times in which we live.

As a nation we are, it seems, continually sinking to new depths of what Gertrude Himmelfarb referred to as the “de-moralization of society.” We have substituted values for virtues, with the result that now everyone is free to do what seems right in his or her own eyes. Dr. Himmelfarb wrote, “Values, as we now understand that word, do not have to be virtues; they can be beliefs, opinions, attitudes, feelings, habits, conventions, preferences, prejudices, even idiosyncrasies – whatever any individual, group, or society happens to value, at any time for any reason. One cannot say of virtues, as one can of values, that anyone’s virtues are as good as anyone else’s, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues. Only values can lay that claim to moral equality and neutrality.”

But if America continues on its present tack, the ship of our state is headed for moral break-up on the rocks and shoals of pragmatism and relativism. Many people agree that we need a renewal of the virtues in our day, but few seem to have any meaningful prescriptions for how such a renewal can be achieved.

Surely the Christian community can make a contribution here. We who have been “created in Christ Jesus unto good works” (Eph. 2:10) should be the bellwethers of virtue for our society. If there is to be any true renewing of virtue, it must begin among those people whose traditions and teachings are rooted in the unchanging virtues that benefit all of society.

William Wilberforce understood this. The adjectives that describe our society could just as easily have been applied to his at the turn of the 19th century. Wilberforce took it as one of his life objectives to accomplish a reformation in manners among the people of England. He labored tirelessly through all his adult life, creating organizations and movements to promote holiness, good works, and neighbor-love across a broad spectrum of English society. The result of his efforts, supported by the generation-long Second Great Awakening, was the Victorian Era of moral decency – from which, Gertrude Himmelfarb explains, we are now being “de-moralized.”

Christians need to rediscover the great virtues of our faith tradition. The eight lessons in this series are devoted to encouraging renewed interest in and practice of those virtues which characterize those who follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

We hope you will prepare well and take an active part in helping your fellow students grow in Christian virtue. Let’s join together in praying for a groundswell of renewed dedication to virtuous living. It may be that God will be pleased to use us, as He did William Wilberforce, to steer our nation onto a new tack and a new course, and away from the moral disintegration currently threatening us.

1 A Failure of Obedience

And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel. Judges 2:10

Free for all - literally

Pragmatism is that philosophy of life which takes as its fundamental premise, “Whatever works must be true.” That’s rather simplistic, I know; but in essence, this is the pragmatist’s creed. As a formal school of thought, pragmatism developed early in the last century as a way to accelerate the progressivist agenda of early 20th century political leaders. Its founders, men like John Dewey, as well as its contemporary practitioners admit a high degree of self-interest in their approach to life, and are persuaded that just the right amount of self-interest can be counted on to temper violence and injustice. They anticipate a kind of level-playing-field society, in which all people are free to practice their own worldview and pursue their aspirations by whatever means they find most suitable to their purposes. Pragmatism is thus in many ways the mother of relativism. But has pragmatism’s “freedom for all” created a moral free-for-all in contemporary America?

The philosophy of pragmatism, while first articulated in the last century and just now beginning to gain a real head of steam, is as old as the Book of Judges. The generation that grew up in Israel after Joshua and his peers invented the idea that whatever works is right, and they practiced it with horrific consequences.

Doorway to pragmatism

The days following the death of Joshua were heady days in Israel. The people had recently recommitted themselves to the Lord (Joshua 24), and they were determined to get on with the task of settling the land of promise and enjoying the blessings of God. But there was work to be done, and, led by the tribe of Judah, the people took up the last stages of the conquest of the land. In the process, they set the stage for the onset of pragmatism (chapter 1). For in failing completely to drive out the pagan inhabitants of Canaan, Israel guaranteed that they would have to make compromises to be able to live together in peace.

This is where pragmatic and relativistic thinking begins to take root: when any society forsakes an ethics grounded in absolute values and unchanging truth, in order to accommodate the wishes or gain the support of those who object, that society is on the way to pragmatism. The people of Israel failed to understand that any obedience to God’s Word short of full obedience is but a light in the window to whatever forceful worldview might come along seeking accommodations. In just one generation after Joshua’s death the people had already forgotten the Lord – not that they didn’t know Him by name, and some of what He had done in the past; but they did not know Him as their Savior and King. Their hearts, not securely grounded in His Word, were open to whatever accommodations would be necessary to live at peace with their unbelieving neighbors.

Pragmatism in America

In America today, pragmatism has been all but enthroned as the official ethics of the land. In the 1992 Supreme Court case, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, Justices O’Connor, Kennedy, and Souter, writing for the majority, declared, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life.” The people of Israel learned the hard way that where individuals are left to chart their own ethical course in life, without fixed moral precepts to guide them, mere self-interest rules the land – bringing with it moral and spiritual decline, social disintegration, and widespread angst and uncertainty. Israel’s experience during the period of the judges can thus be instructive for us in our own day, when every American is encouraged to do what it is right in his own eyes.

Next steps: What do pragmatism and relativism look like in your world? In what ways do you observe people acting out of mere self-interest, apparently without any fixed principles beyond “what works” for them? Talk with some of your Christian friends about your observations. Do you see any of this tendency in yourself?

For reflection

1. “But has pragmatism’s “freedom for all” created a moral free-for-all in contemporary America?” How would you answer this question? What examples, situations, or conditions can you cite to support your answer?
2. Do a little more reading at colsoncenter.org on “Pragmatism” and “Relativism.” On the home page, in the box at the top center right labeled, “Search Colson Library,” type either one of these words. Then, hit your “Enter” key. You might also choose a selection from the articles listed in the “additional resources” section at the end of lesson 7. Choose an article or two to read, and make some notes in the space below to help you prepare for your group discussion. Be sure to include the titles and authors of the articles you read:

For prayer:

2 The Essence of Pragmatism

In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes. Judges 17:6

The pragmatist's creed

By the time we come across this first of several statements of the pragmatist's creed, we might wonder why it took the writer so long to explain the unfolding tragedy of the Book of Judges. By chapter 17 we have witnessed several cycles of Israel's falling into rebellion and sin, only to come under the displeasure and discipline of God, from which they cry out to God for deliverance, and He obliges. We wonder how it could happen, generation after generation, that the people experienced the deliverance of God, were renewed in His grace, and then promptly forgot Him and failed to teach their children to trust in the Lord.

The lack of a king committed to God's covenant obligations, and the failure of religious leaders to teach God's Law, together with the presence of hard-core pagans in every part of the land, set up a formula for disaster, generation after generation: Forget the goodness of God, fail to dwell within His Word, get too cozy with the unbelievers in your midst, and pretty soon compromise becomes the order of the day, followed by full-blown pragmatism.

Journey to pragmatism

Americans have followed a similar path since the days of the Founding. The generations who created the American experiment were a broad mixture of European immigrants. They came from many nations, led by a variety of motives, and with different dreams and visions. They were not perfect, and their treatment of Native Americans and African slaves is to be deplored; yet the dominant force guiding the American founding was the Christian worldview and the Biblical ethics of the preachers, parents, and politicians who declared themselves independent of Great Britain in 1776. It was the liberty, hope, and opportunity that worldview sustained which brought continuing streams of immigrants to these shores.

Yet it remained to be seen whether succeeding generations would be able to maintain the convictions of that worldview amid the changing intellectual climate of the new century.

It did not take long for the spirit of pragmatism to intrude. By the middle of the 19th century, leaders of the major Christian denominations suddenly found themselves having to contend with two powerful philosophical ideas at the same time: Darwinism and "higher criticism." The former is well enough understood. "Higher criticism" applied the tenets of Darwinian social thinking to the composition and interpretation of Scripture, creating a large body of highly academic and intellectual argumentation which, as a byproduct, if not a primary objective, boiled the idea of inspiration out of Scripture and undermined the authority of the Bible. Not wanting to appear anti-intellectual, Christian leaders, who should have exposed and expelled both these pagan notions, instead tried to make room for them within evangelical Christian faith. Compromise followed upon compromise while new academic disciplines – notably, psychiatry and sociology – emerged to take the place that Christian theology was abandoning to the worldview of unbelief.

By the beginning of the 20th century the evangelical community was frantically seeking leaders to recover the lost ground, but the Church became satisfied only with re-asserting the "fundamentals" of the faith and left the larger issues of life and culture to Darwinians in various guises and fields. Along the way two world wars and the rise of Marxism should have warned that Darwin was wrong, but by then the voice of the faithful had yielded the ground to the advocates of pragmatism. Everyone was becoming firmly ensconced in doing what was right in his own eyes.

Next steps: Do you think the spirit of pragmatism has found its way into the churches? Do you see anything that looks pragmatic or relativistic in the practices of your own church? Talk with a church leader about these questions.

For reflection

1. “The lack of a king committed to God’s covenant obligations, and the failure of religious leaders to teach God’s Law, together with the presence of hard-core pagans in every part of the land, set up a formula for disaster, generation after generation: Forget the goodness of God, fail to dwell within His Word, get too cozy with the unbelievers in your midst, and pretty soon compromise becomes the order of the day, followed by full-blown pragmatism.” In your mind, is the Church in America today at all in danger of falling into this downward spiral of pragmatism and relativism? Why or why not?

2. Read another article on “Pragmatism” or “Relativism” at colsoncenter.org, and make notes below to help you prepare for your group discussion. Be sure to include the title and author of the article you read:

For prayer:

3 The Course of Pragmatism

Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the LORD, and they did not do so. Judges 2:17

Whatever works

The people during the period of the Judges chose to live their lives as best they could, grasping at whatever ideas, plans, or arrangements would enable them to live at peace with their pagan neighbors. They never succeeded, for no sooner did they make room for the pagans in their midst, and begin to emulate their ways, than the pagans came roaring in with all their guns blazing, and Israelites became slaves in their own land.

God was faithful, even though His people were not, and again and again He gave them faithful leaders and breathing space, only to see them squander every advantage and fall into pragmatism and oppression once again. The pattern that occurs in cycles throughout the Book of Judges is a sad testimony to what can happen when the people who know God choose the ways of the world over the ways of God's Word.

The pattern

Judges 2:16-23 outlines the pattern whereby pragmatic thinking overwhelms and condemns a people. First, a period of trouble and hardship was relieved by an act of divine favor, and the people were allowed to become comfortable in their blessings (v. 16). Next, they became indifferent or even hostile to the teaching of God's Word (v. 17). I don't imagine that there was much outright denouncing of Scripture; rather, I suspect that people just sort of let it go, all the while believing that God loved them and would take care of them – and besides, studying the Bible is a lot of work. The judges would labor faithfully to convince the people to stay true to the Lord, but their responses were half-hearted at best (v. 18). Once the judge died the people turned away from God and took up the idols and immoral practices of their pagan neighbors (v. 19). They did what they wanted, whatever seemed right in their eyes – all the while clinging to some modicum of belief in God – so that they could live at peace with their pagan neighbors and enjoy whatever of paganism they thought might be worth enjoying. God's judgment shortly followed, because He will not sit by and allow His people to drag His Name into the dirt by their neglect of and disobedience to His Word and their compromised, pragmatic ways.

We see this pattern at work in the recent history of Christianity in increasingly pragmatic America. A period of hardship and trouble, in which liberalism destroyed the spiritual vitality of thousands of churches, was followed by a season of evangelical renewal in the years following World War II. Blessings abounded in the form of new churches and a variegated Christian culture. But by the 80s and 90s, zeal for God's Word was diminishing and many Church leaders were looking as much to the spirit of pragmatism and postmodernism as to the Spirit of God for their understanding of the life of faith. Now the Church sits comfortably ensconced on the moral and cultural margins of American society, while believers, trumpeting the virtues of tolerance and love, neglect sound doctrine and repentance. Instead, they pursue their Christian lives according to whatever prophet or preacher suits their whims and fancies.

Christianity in America has become, in many places, a sad reflection of the pragmatic, "whatever works" mentality of the rest of society. We still believe in God, but we insist that God should serve our needs and satisfy our demands for happiness as we indulge our commerce in sensuality and things in the name of the Lord. We ask, "What would Jesus do?" and then we explain that Jesus will do whatever it takes to make us happy. And then, setting aside Biblical doctrine and ethics, we do what seems right in our own eyes.

Next steps: Re-read that last paragraph. Do you agree? In what ways can you see this tendency at work in your own church? Begin to make this a matter of daily prayer for your church and church leaders.

For reflection

1. “Now the Church sits comfortably ensconced on the moral and cultural margins of American society, while believers, trumpeting the virtues of tolerance and love, neglect sound doctrine and repentance. Instead, they pursue their Christian lives according to whatever prophet or preacher suits their whims and fancies.” What does T. M. mean by this statement? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

2. At colsoncenter.org, read the article, “[Culture and Compromise](#)” by Charles Colson (you can click the link, if you have these materials in a PDF form, or you can type this title into the Search Colson Library box at colsoncenter.org). How does Chuck’s perspective help us in thinking about the effects of pragmatism on the Church?

For prayer:

4 Celebrity Leaders

Now Gideon had seventy sons, his own offspring, for he had many wives. And his concubine who was in Shechem also bore him a son, and he called his name Abimelech. Judges 8:30, 31

Full of themselves

Gideon, the first of what I call Israel's "celebrity leaders", presents a case study in the workings of pragmatism. He began well. Chosen of the Lord to lead the people out from under the oppression of the Midianites, he believed and obeyed and accomplished a mighty deliverance in the strength of the Lord (Judges 6, 7). Then the trouble began. Full of himself and his great victory, Gideon dealt harshly with those Israelites who did not serve with him (had he forgotten that God Himself had hand-picked his army? – chapter 8). Then the people, grateful for his deliverance, wanted to make him king, but he refused – almost. He made an image of gold and housed it in his city, thus attracting the worship of Israel throughout his lifetime (8:23-28). But there was more disingenuous pragmatism yet to come.

On top of the world, so it must have seemed, Gideon decided that he could do pretty much whatever worked for him. He had many wives, but a great conqueror deserves a little more. So he took a concubine and kept her in another city – conveniently away from where the people came to worship Gideon's ephod. With his concubine Gideon had a son, and he who so "nobly" refused the invitation to rule over all Israel named his son, Abimelech: "my father is king."

It's no wonder that, immediately after Gideon died, the people who followed the ruler who whored, whored after other gods themselves, thus launching once again into the pattern of pragmatic living in the name of the Lord. The same pattern can be discerned in the lives of Jephthah (chapters 11 and 12) and Samson (chapters 13-16), as well as in the story of Micah and his Levite (chapters 17, 18). In each case men simply chose to do what they thought was best for them, rather than to stand firm on the Word of God and obey every word that came from His mouth. They copied their pagan neighbors, borrowed from their pragmatic ways, resorted to guile and violence like their neighbors, and ended up leaving the nation separated from God and under His judgment once again.

Better than God?

Celebrity leaders – whether big shots or small stuff – can easily come to believe that they know better than God how to do His business. The outward trappings of obedience and success may be present, but the heart plays fast and loose with the Word of God in a leadership scheme devoted above all to padding the church's numbers and advancing the status of the leader.

Celebrity leaders mount campaigns, count followers, and tout their successes, all the while invoking the name of God to "bless" their projects and enterprises. Celebrity leaders must be seen, so they engage big media, travel far and wide, create products and programs bearing their names, and hire many underlings to carry out their grandiose schemes. Celebrity leaders thrive on adoring followers, whom they manipulate with marketing and vain promises of health, wealth, and happiness into funding their every vision and whim. They teach the Bible, but not in any way that would be recognized by the saints and martyrs of previous generations. They pray to Jesus, but only as Bestower of Blessings, and never as King and Lord. Blinded by popularity and success, they take their stand between the pillars of the houses of God they have built for their own glory, and rant and charm and propound with all their might to call down the blessings of God. But are they only pulling down the judgment of God upon themselves and their adoring and pragmatic followers?

Next steps: Share these thoughts about "celebrity leaders" with some leaders in your church. What can you and your leaders do to help ensure that your church doesn't come under the influence of celebrity leaders?

For reflection

1. “Blinded by popularity and success, they take their stand between the pillars of the houses of God they have built for their own glory, and rant and charm and propound with all their might to call down the blessings of God. But are they only pulling down the judgment of God upon themselves and their adoring and pragmatic followers?” How does a local church become vulnerable to following a celebrity leader? How might you be able to tell, in your own church, when you might be drifting into such a situation?

2. At colsoncenter.org, type the words, “church leadership”, into the Search Colson Library box. Read an article or two on this topic, and make some notes on the kind of church leaders we need. You might also select from the “additional resources” following lesson 7. Be sure to cite the title and author of your article:

For prayer:

5 The Consequences of Pragmatism

And the people came to Bethel and sat there till evening before God, and they lifted up their voices and wept bitterly. Judges 21:2

We have met the enemy...

We wonder what all the weeping and wailing is about. After all, the nation had just accomplished a mighty victory against a most heinous and immoral enemy. They had practically destroyed their foe, leaving almost no survivors.

The problem, of course, was that the foe was, well, one of them. The pragmatic Israelites had united against the equally pragmatic tribe of Benjamin for the simple reason that they judged Benjamin's pragmatism to have gone too far (Judges 19, 20). As this situation demonstrates, pragmatism degenerates into power politics, in which the real face of pragmatism finally comes to light and people get hurt. For the ones who are able to garner the most power will wield it as they see fit, and only after the place is in ruins do they perhaps come to their senses and weep.

We see this little drama played out in American politics. I'm reminded of former-Speaker Pelosi's message to the Republicans in Congress, shortly after the inauguration of President Obama: We won, and we're going to do what we think is right, whether you like it or not. And, of course, they did. Until, that is, the voters – regretting their pragmatic choice – tossed the Democrats out of the House of Representatives and took away their super-majority in the Senate. The nation's capital since then has witnessed the politics of pragmatism and the struggle between competing views of pragmatism, with celebrity leaders in both parties marshaling their troops for whatever is to be the next campaign.

...and he is us!

It's not the first time that pragmatism has flexed its power to establish its position – not even among the followers of Christ. During the Reformation, pragmatic Protestants, unable to persuade Anabaptists of their “re-baptizing heresy,” simply drowned them. Pragmatic Roman Catholics, unwilling to engage in free and open debate with dissenters, excommunicated them and hunted many of them to death. Over the years, church leaders touting differing pragmatic theologies have preferred to split and fragment the Body of Christ, rather than working hard at preserving her unity, in the name of “doing whatever works” to continue believing as they like.

In our day pragmatic mega-churches do whatever works to enable them to enlist more members, in the process filling their theater seats with Biblical illiterates and draining the life from neighborhood congregations. Pragmatic Christian leaders turn to marketing rather than prayer, programs rather than disciple-making, showmanship rather than proclamation, and entertainment rather than evangelism. All these we do simply because we can; there is no king in the Church today. We are captivated by the pragmatic spirit of the age, unwilling to listen to and obey every word coming from the mouth of God; we do whatever it takes to do whatever we think is best. The way we exercise our peculiar privileges and power may differ from the Israelites of the Book of Judges or the politicians in our nation's capital, but the stultifying and destructive effects are pretty much the same.

Except, so far, for the weeping.

Next steps: Is this a time for weeping? What do you think it will take for church leaders today to begin recognizing that, for all our outward “success”, we are not really affecting our culture and society with the presence of the Kingdom? Talk with some of your Christian friends about this. Should you commit to praying together for God to revive His churches?

6 Grace for the Pragmatic

Then Samson called to the LORD and said, “O Lord GOD, please remember me and please strengthen me only this once, O God, that I may be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes.” Judges 16:28

A better pragmatist

As is the case with most pragmatists, Samson’s “do it my way” lifestyle ultimately got him into trouble. Set apart unto the Lord from childhood, he nevertheless didn’t flinch at indulging certain pagan comforts and entertainments as part of the deal. He took a pagan wife, played the game of wiles and wits with pagans, wreaked havoc on people he didn’t know just to get even, and flaunted his strength and status as if to dare anyone to try to best him. As the premier pragmatist of his generation, Samson enjoyed the best of both worlds – the life of faith and the life of pagan pleasures.

Samson’s undoing came when he met a better pragmatist than he. Delilah proved that, when it came to acting in one’s own self-interest, Samson the man of God didn’t have anything on her. Her perseverance and guile ended up bringing Samson to humiliation and weakness – just the place he needed to be in order to rediscover the grace of God.

Made perfect in weakness

God’s grace is made perfect in our weakness, Paul reminds us (2 Cor. 12:9). When we’re feeling strong and looking good, when everything’s going our way – even though that may not quite be God’s way – then it’s hard to imagine that the blessings of the Lord aren’t with us. Sure, there may be a little compromising here and there, a little “doing what the pagans do” in order, you know, to “fit in.” But I’m still God’s man, we’re still God’s church, and all you have to do is look at the numbers to know it’s true.

Samson had big numbers, too, and his big numbers allowed him to justify his compromises and his “whatever I want” approach to judging Israel; but his fall was most humiliating.

Perhaps this generation of the followers of Christ needs to be brought to humiliation before we will cry out to God for grace to renew us. We’ve seen how the pragmatic ways of many evangelical leaders have led to public humiliation time and time again, but we have yet to apply the lesson to our churches and other ministries. We see very little sense of sorrow for sin or repentance among the members of Christ’s Body at large. Will we have to be brought down, oppressed, and humiliated in public before we cry out to God for deliverance from our pragmatic ways?

As good as it gets?

In some ways, the Church in America is blind to its own weakness. We see our flourishing programs, our churches abuzz with activities and bursting at the seams, and we appear to be, for the most part, content with the overall state of affairs. But we have forsaken our mission of evangelizing the lost, and we seem powerless – or unwilling – to leaven the culture with the beauty, goodness, and truth of the Gospel. We’re like Samson, flaunting the strength of our numbers but failing to see the many ways our vitality is being sapped by our pragmatic indulgence of secular and material ways. So we’re not changing the world. So what?

If we think the Church in contemporary America is as good as it gets, it simply proves that we’re not listening to the Word of God; we’re simply tallying up our numbers. As long as we continue on this tack, we can expect that God will withhold His renewing grace.

Next steps: How do your church leaders evaluate the overall health of your church? Ask a few of them. Do their answers sound more pragmatic than Biblical?

7 The Way Back

But when the people of Israel cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the people of Israel, who saved them...
Judges 3:9

Returning to grace

God's grace was never very far from His people during the period of the judges. Just about the time it looked like Israel was gone for good, God would show up and renew them, sending them just the right leader or leaders to help them regain their footing before Him.

Just as we can discern a pattern of descent into pragmatism in the Book of Judges, so we can discern a pattern for escaping the horrific effects of pragmatic living and for returning to the grace of the Lord. It's a three-step process, and one we in the American Church would do well to adopt in these pragmatic and uncertain times.

Recognize the mess

First, we need to recognize the mess we're in. Israel in the Book of Judges had to come to the place of admitting that living like pagans wasn't all it was advertised to be. They were miserable, poor, wretched, immoral, and oppressed – not exactly what God had promised them in the land of promise. They were honest enough to say, "We're disgusting, we're slaves to pagan ways, and we're not the people we ought to be." That's the first step. There will be no repentance or renewal without a serious and honest evaluation of the depths of the mess we've made of things.

Turn to the Lord

Second, immediately after that, we must turn to the Lord. The people of Israel confessed their pragmatic and disobedient ways and bewailed their misery and oppression. They seemed at these times to be truly sorry and willing to forsake all their compromises with paganism if only God would come and bring them relief. Israel cried out to God in extended seasons of prayer and seeking, joining together to plead with God for renewing grace and revival. If ever we get to the place of recognizing just how desperate our situation has become in the contemporary Church, then perhaps we'll be willing to seek reviving grace in united, extraordinary seasons of prayer.

Get new leaders

Finally, we need to search out leaders whose sole qualification for leadership is that they take God at His Word and do precisely what He tells them to do. God instructed Moses to build His dwelling-place according to the pattern He revealed, not according to the practices of the pagan world. We need leaders who will search the Scriptures – and not the marketing or entertainment reviews – in order to determine how to lead the Church to renewal.

This is the formula for breaking the grip of pragmatism: admit our disgusting and disappointing condition; repent and seek the Lord; turn to leaders who will stand squarely on the Word of God and resist every temptation to compromise. We don't have to wait until our pragmatic ways become our undoing. In many ways, we certainly seem to have mounted that descent. But it's not too late to seek the Lord. If we can agree that our pragmatism has put us in a miserable condition, then we can seek the Lord together and search out those leaders who stand only on His Word, and nothing else.

Next steps: How might you help your church to keep from falling into the clutches of pragmatism and relativism? What can you begin to do that you are not presently doing? How might you encourage your fellow church members to help?

Additional Resources and Activities on the Need for Renewing Virtue

Chuck Colson's burden for the virtuous living and the Christian worldview is best articulated in his books, [How Now Shall We Live?](#), and [The Good Life](#). Order your copies today from our online store.

Here are some resources to get you started working for a renewal of virtue in our day:

Charles Colson, "[The Good Little Kittens: Bill Bennett Teaches Virtue](#)"

Charles Colson, "[The Resurrection of Old Man Can't](#)"

Charles Colson, "[What a Character](#)"

Jim Forest, "[Christian Types, Christian Virtues, Christian Unity](#)"

Gertrude Himmelfarb, "[Learning from Victorian Virtues](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Give All Diligence](#)"

John G. Turner, "[Civility and Boldness](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some actions you can take to begin a movement renewing Christian virtue:

1. Share this lesson's *Two-Minute Warning* with some friends, and invite them to join you in reading or viewing some of the resources listed above. Your instructor can email the link for the *Two-Minute Warning* to you, or you may look it up at colsoncenter.org. Come up with some goals to work toward in helping to grow in your understanding of the Christian worldview.
2. Talk with some Christian friends about the difference between "values" and "virtues." Would they say that their own lives are characterized by one of these more than the other? Why?

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some Christian friends: "Many people are concerned about the state of morality and civility in our society today. Shouldn't we as Christians be able to contribute to renewing virtue in our nation? How can we do that?"

Courage

What Do They Got That We Don't Got?

Many Christians have expressed varying degrees of anger, dismay, and concern over the recent appearance of greatly emboldened witnesses for a secular and atheistic worldview. In popular books, on what seems like an endless array of Internet blogs, in rallies and interviews, and on campuses across the country, people like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Lawrence Krauss and their committed followers are firing up the unbelieving faithful to agitate for an atheistic worldview.

The response of the Christian community has been fairly subdued. Some bloggers are involved along with a few high-visibility apologists and a handful of pastors. For the most part, individual believers are sitting out this latest onslaught of radical unbelief, preferring to keep a low profile and not to risk disturbing their unbelieving friends and coworkers.

Meanwhile, the ranks of rowdy rationalists continue to grow, and we might wonder why they are able to be so noisy and self-assured while the members of the Body of Christ appear to be trapped in a spiral of silence. Like the Cowardly Lion, we might be tempted to ask, "What've they got that we don't got?" The answer, of course, is "courage." If 40 million Christians had the courage of their convictions, would we be so cowed into silence by a handful of unruly unbelievers? If we were truly courageous in our witness, would we worry that our friends might be offended or think us silly or naïve?

In the Christian community we are flush with many good things. But one thing we do lack is the courage to stand firm for our faith in the face of growing naturalism, secularism, and unbelief. We have not prepared well, and we're not putting forth the kind of uniform, advancing front against the propagandizers of atheism that you might expect from a community of our size and distribution.

Christian courage is a work of God's Spirit which comes to us as a result of faith and obedience. In faith we plead with God and pray for one another, that we might speak the Gospel boldly, as we ought. And in obedience we open our mouths to bear witness to Christ, trusting that God the Spirit will give us the words we need for each particular situation. Courage to speak translates into courage to live for Christ. And what Christians need today to withstand the current surge of atheism is courage.

Courage is one of the four "cardinal" virtues of the Christian faith – along with prudence, temperance, and justice. The courage shown by previous generations of believers has made it possible for the Gospel to penetrate to every corner of the globe, for unjust and corrupt societies to be dramatically transformed, and for many good and useful innovations to be introduced to everyday life.

Pope John Paul II inspired a generation of oppressed believers, and helped to hasten the end of the Soviet empire, by repeatedly calling his flocks to have courage: "Do not be afraid," he instructed them. And in repressed places like Poland and Romania, faithful believers took up the challenge and courageously faced down brutal regimes, helping to bring freedom to captive peoples throughout Eastern Europe and Russia.

Christians in this country need courage to renew their mission of proclaiming the Good News to our secular and unbelieving age. We have been silent too long. We have given too much uncontested ground to the proponents of unbelief. It's time to seek the Lord for courage.

8 Out of the Fullness of the Heart

“The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” Luke 6:45

Where your treasure is

It is often possible to discern the priorities of a person’s heart by listening to his conversation. If Jesus is correct, and by our mouths we express what is filling our hearts, then the topics of a person’s conversation can be a reliable indicator of the “treasure” he has stored up in his heart.

When I taught seminary I would occasionally require students to keep track of their activities, including their conversations, for a week. They used a simple 3x5 card and wrote these down each day. Then, when we would come back together for class, I would ask each student for a report. Topics of conversation ranged from family matters to issues or projects at work, the fate of the local sports team, interesting things on TV or the latest film, and, as we might expect, things related to their faith in Jesus Christ.

After all had shared their summaries, I would ask, “OK, based on these conversations, what would you say is the *fullness* of your own heart? What do you think about most often? Feel most strongly about? Talk about with others most readily?” The answers were what you might expect: family, work, diversions, and, oh yes, faith.

The heart is the heart of the matter in life. The attitudes, desires, longings, aspirations, hopes, and fears that rule in our hearts will determine, to a very great extent, the priorities of our lives. And if there is one affection that brings together all the most powerful and positive affections of our hearts, it is surely courage. The word itself has the word, “heart,” “*cour*”, at its root. When we are acting courageously, all our most powerful affections come together as one to move us in extraordinary ways.

Courage

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines courage as “That quality of mind which shows itself in facing danger without fear or shrinking,” and equates courage with “bravery, boldness, valour.” While courage certainly engages our minds, it originates in our hearts, where, in order to find expression, it must overcome such other powerful emotions as complacency, tentativeness, timidity, and fear. Courage binds love, devotion, determination, hope, and zeal into a single, powerful emotion that enables us, when it is engaged, to overcome our fears, exceed our expectations, and surmount our greatest challenges.

We tend to think of courage as a momentary affection, something we call upon or summon up for extraordinary situations. So it’s not surprising that normal conversation probably doesn’t reveal the presence of courage in our hearts. But the things we *do* talk about, as they reveal the fullness of our hearts, can help us to know whether or not, when push comes to shove, we will have the courage we need when the situation requires it. If our conversations revolve mostly around ourselves and our daily occupations and preoccupations, and if there is little talk about the Lord and His Kingdom, promises, and glory, then it’s likely our hearts are full of trivial affections, such as complacency and self-interest.

Christian courage

But if we want courage to serve us well when it is needed most, then we shall have to sharpen our focus and build up the treasury of our hearts. We can nurture Christian courage by making sure that we love and delight in the Lord above all else, that we practice compassion and caring toward others, and that we have zeal for the truth and glory of God at all times and in every situation. When these represent the fullness of our hearts, we will talk about them more consistently and with more evident joy and delight. And when that is the case, anything that threatens these cherished values and priorities can spark within us the fires of Christian courage.

Next steps: Try it yourself: Monitor your conversations for a week or so. What comes out as representing the fullness of your heart? Is that fullness sufficient to engender courage whenever it might be required? Share your observations and reflections with some Christian friends. Invite them to do the same, then get together to discuss how you might “encourage” one another – build courage into one another’s lives – in this most important affection.

For reflection

1. “If Jesus is correct, and by our mouths we express what is filling our hearts, then the topics of a person’s conversation can be a reliable indicator of the ‘treasure’ he has stored up in his heart.” Based on your own typical conversation habits, what seem to be the “treasures” stored up in your heart?

2. Look through the “additional resources” at the end of lesson 14. Choose one to read and reflect on in preparation for your discussion. Make some notes below:

For prayer:

9 Christian Courage

Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think, according to the power at work with us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. Ephesians 3:20, 21

A powerful affection

Courage is a powerful affection. It brings together a wide range of other affections – love, devotion, even anger at times – into a single motivating power within us. Courage can lead us to say or do things we might never have dared to think possible. But courage in and of itself is not necessarily a good thing. Lots of people over the years have shown great courage for unjust causes and improper ends. *Mere* courage – a power that works within us to enable us to overcome fears and surmount challenges – is not what the Christian should be seeking. The Christian wants the treasury of his heart to be filled with distinctly *Christian* courage.

But what do we mean by that? We can approach an understanding of Christian courage from a variety of angles, and we shall do so in subsequent days in this lesson. Most importantly, however, we need to understand that Christian courage – the ability to overcome fears and surmount challenges in the name of Christ and for the sake of His Kingdom – is a work of the Spirit of God, Who dwells within each believer.

A work of God's Spirit

Why must this be so? Why do we need a work of the Spirit of God to move us to acts of Christian courage? A couple of reasons: First, we are not *naturally* courageous – at least, not in the right directions. By nature we are self-interested and self-protecting. If it were otherwise, we would not have to be commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves; we just would.

But we don't. Love has to be learned, and so does Christian courage. We must be *taught* the proper ends toward which courage should be directed. Slicing off an unarmed servant's ear in a dark garden is not the kind of Christian courage we require. Standing firm when others accuse us of being followers of Jesus, especially when taking such a stand is not convenient or perhaps safe – that requires courage. Peter was not courageous in the garden of Gethsemane, and he was not courageous in denying the Lord three times. But he would become one of the most courageous Christians of his generation. He had yet to learn the true nature of Christian courage, which the Lord was at pains to teach him through these patent failures of courage.

But beyond learning about courage, we actually need *the power of God* in order to act courageously. Again, by nature we do not act courageously, whether by word or deed. But if we can learn the true nature of Christian courage – what it is, where it comes from, why it matters, and how to express it – then, when the opportunity for courage arises, we can draw on the Spirit of God to take us *beyond* our fears, *beyond* our comfort zone, *beyond* any previous experiences, *into* realms of word and deed that we can only account for as the work of the Spirit within us.

Exceeding abundantly more

Real Christian courage enables us to do more – even exceeding abundantly more – than we would ever have thought we were capable of in serving Christ and advancing His Kingdom. As we grow to understand the key components of Christian courage, and as we discover the means for engaging the indwelling Spirit of God, we will surprise even ourselves to see how God can work within us in surprisingly courageous ways. Christian courage is a work of God's Spirit, so we will never take credit for it, never boast of being bold or courageous, and always make sure to give God the praise, glory, and honor whenever any of His people act in courageous ways for Christ and His Kingdom.

Next steps: Where does courage come from? How can we become more courageous? Talk with your pastor or one of your church leaders. How would they advise you to become more courageous for Christ and His Kingdom? Share what they share with you with some of your Christian friends.

For reflection

1. “Why do we need a work of the Spirit of God to move us to acts of Christian courage? A couple of reasons: First, we are not *naturally* courageous – at least, not in the right directions. By nature we are self-interested and self-protecting. If it were otherwise, we would not have to be commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves; we just would.” How does this lack of courage show up in your own life? How might you begin to gain more Christian courage?

2. From the resources provided after lesson 14, choose an article to read. Make some notes on your reading, so that you can use the article to contribute to the group discussion:

For prayer:

10 Courage and Promises

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. Hebrews 11:8

Moving beyond our comfort zone

Is it possible to grow in Christian courage? I believe it is. Christian courage – the ability to go beyond ourselves in the face of danger or challenges, in order to serve Christ and seek His Kingdom – is a work of God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit works within us to make us willing and able to do what pleases the Lord (Phil. 2:13). He is able to do, in and through us, exceeding abundantly above all that we’ve ever dared to ask or think. Christian courage comes into play when we move beyond our comfort zone into areas of uncertainty and even fear, where all we have to hope in is the Word of God.

The Spirit of God works in just such situations. Consider Abraham: God came to Abraham with a challenge sure to scare the wits out of most of us: Leave your familiar home and family, set aside your career, forget about the religion you’ve known since childhood, and go somewhere you’ve never been before, among foreign peoples whose language and culture you do not know. Now that’s scary. But God was able to move Abraham to obey His call and to head out toward the land of Canaan, there to discover God’s purpose and plan for his life. How did God do that? What did He give the Spirit to work with to engender such courage within Abraham?

Precious and very great promises

He gave him promises. God made promises to Abraham, and they were sufficiently compelling to create a new vision in Abraham’s mind, a compelling sense of mission, and the courage to leave his comfortable surroundings. It’s interesting to consider that Abraham knew the *promises* of God even before he really knew *God Himself* very well. He would get to know God over time, and discover Him to be infinitely wise and powerful – a God to be feared and trusted. But it was the promises God made to Abraham which made the initial deposit of godly courage in his soul.

Peter refers to God’s promises as “precious and very great” (2 Pet. 1:4), and, indeed they are. The promises made to Abraham included an intimate relationship with the living God, influence beyond anything he’d ever imagined before, provision for all his needs and protection against all foes, and the ability to channel the blessings of God to all the people of the earth, for all time (Gen 12:1-3). Those were indeed to Abraham “precious and very great promises.” But by focusing on those promises and moving toward them day by day, Abraham gained more than what the promises held out to him: He gained fellowship and friendship with the living God Himself.

Caught up in the promises

Abraham was *encouraged* to go beyond what was familiar and safe, to venture in new directions of obedience, because he was captivated by the promises God had made to him. The Spirit of God worked in the mind of Abraham to make those promises a constant focus. He worked in Abraham’s heart so that he desired those promises above all else. The Spirit lodged the promises of God in Abraham’s conscience, where they became the default choices in all the decisions of his life. And Abraham acted courageously because he lived in and toward the promises of God’s Word.

We will grow in Christian courage when we understand the promises God made to Abraham as promises to us as well (Rom. 4:13-25). Study the promises of God. Envision them working out in your life – what each of them would look like in your daily experience. Pray that God will make His promises “precious and very great” to you. As the promises of God begin to command your imagination and rule in your heart, you will find that your treasury of Christian courage is increasing, as you live more consistently toward those promises day by day.

11 Courage and Fear

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there. Genesis 12:10

Misplaced fear

Abraham showed great courage in fleeing the famine in Canaan and taking his wife to Egypt. True, it was not an *admirable* courage – he was bold to lie to the king of Egypt about his relationship with his wife. Lying to kings – especially those who are looked upon as deities – takes courage. But Abraham’s courage was misguided. He feared the king of Egypt and so he lied to him in order to protect his own hide. Yes, I know, that’s not really courage at all, even though doing what he did certainly involved a lot of risk. If Abraham’s *fear* had been lodged in the right place, he might have acted in *true courage* in this situation, and remained in Canaan, waiting on and moving toward the promises of God.

Abraham’s fear was misplaced. Fear, as we have mentioned, is one of the affections that sometimes plays into courage, enabling us to do things we’ve never done before. In this case, Abraham feared the famine in Canaan. He was afraid he might starve to death. So, rather than keep his eye on the promises of God and stay put, he allowed the fear of famine to move him *away from the promises* of God into the unknown terrain of a place beyond where God had indicated.

Then, once he was in Egypt, Abraham feared the king, feared what he might do to him in order to steal his wife. He probably rationalized his lie to the king of Egypt as a very risky and therefore courageous thing to do. But God had another take on the situation.

Two lessons

Abraham learned two things about God through this situation, and they set him on a course of knowing God and *fearing Him*, so that he would *not* fear to continue pursuing the promises of God. First, Abraham learned that God has power over people and nations. God, we read, “afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (v. 17). Abraham learned that God had power over the creation, over human health and wellbeing, even over powerful nations and their god-like kings. God is powerful. And if God can do so much to those who displease Him, what might He do to us when *we* displease Him?

But Abraham also learned that God is gracious, because He spared Abraham the judgment he should have received at the hands of Pharaoh, and He enriched and blessed him instead – *just as He had promised He would*. So Abraham learned to fear God, but he also learned to rest in His power and might, as these work on behalf of those who have found favor in the eyes of the Lord. The first great promise God made to Abraham – that He would draw him into a blessed relationship with Himself – was beginning to be fulfilled, even though Abraham had lost sight of the promises and was living in disobedience.

Growing in the Lord

We will grow in Christian courage as we grow in our relationship with the God Who offers precious and magnificent promises to guide us in this life. Through studying God’s Word, praying daily, looking to God and His promises in the face of trials and challenges, and seeking out the counsel of trusted Christian friends and advisors, we can live courageously for the Lord when push comes to shove in the everyday situations of our lives. His promises will be our supreme desire; we will know His presence with us always; and we will deny lesser fears – whether or circumstance or people – to live in the fear and love of God in all our everyday words and deeds. Christian courage begins in the fear – and love – of God.

The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom, as we know (Ps. 111:10). But the fear of God can also be the beginning of courage. When we fear God more than the threats and challenges that confront us, and as we rest in His grace and promises, we’ll be surprised to discover how truly courageous we can be.

12 Courage and Obedience

By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac...He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead...
Hebrews 11:17, 19

Promises and commands

What do we do when something God has promised appears to conflict with something He is leading us to do? For example, God has promised to give His people a great name, a name that is able to influence others for good and lead them into the blessings of God. But He has also called us to bear witness to Christ, and we're not very good at that, and the people around us have made it clear they don't want to hear it. How can we bless them if we don't share the Good News? How can we influence them for the Kingdom if we never talk to them about it? But if we do share the Gospel, we're just going to make them angry and drive them away. How do we reconcile what appear to be conflicting promises and commands of the Lord?

By acting in obedience, that's how. Consider Abraham again: He was told that Isaac would be the one through whom all the promised blessings of God's relationship with Abraham would begin to flow to the nations and peoples of the world. Abraham surely must have taken good care of young Isaac – feeding him well, teaching him all the right ways to make a living and serve the Lord, protecting him from danger, and so forth. Now God was commanding the unthinkable. He ordered Abraham to take his son to a high mountain and offer him up as a sacrifice.

Faith and obedience

How was Abraham to reconcile this apparent conflict between the promises of God and this unmistakably clear command? By holding on to the promises and acting in obedience. By taking the steps of obedience that would lead him to carry out the command of God, Abraham *believed* that God would fulfill what He had promised, even if He had to raise that poor kid from the dead! We hear this in Abraham's instruction to the servants who went with him and Isaac to the mountain: "Stay here with the donkey; I and the boy will go over there and worship and come again to you." Abraham *believed* God's promise and he *obeyed* God's command. Here is faith at work along two tracks – the track of faith in what God has promised, even when we can't figure out all the details of how this is going to work out; and the track of obedience according to what God had plainly revealed.

Abraham must have felt great fear and dread in this situation, but he did not allow his fear to keep him from acting courageously. By focusing on the promises of God and taking explicit steps of obedience, Abraham was able to engage the Spirit of God for the courage to do the unthinkable. His act of courageous obedience *reinforced the promises of God* and *strengthened his relationship with the Lord*. And this is yet another way that we can increase in Christian courage.

Moving toward the promises

Do you know the promises of God? Do you meditate daily on these precious and very great promises? Do you long above all else to partake of God through these promises, so that you know His glory and are able to show His glory to the world? Don't worry about figuring out how these promises are going to work out. God has His ways, and He works in His time. Our job is to stay focused and keep moving toward what God has promised.

And when He directs us to specific acts of obedience – repent of that sin, get to know that hurting friend, share the Good News with your co-worker, give of your time and substance for this worthy endeavor – by keeping focused on the promises of God and taking the small steps of daily obedience, we will find the presence of God with us to encourage and strengthen us for whatever He calls us to do. Courage arises from promises, is sustained through the fear and love of God, and leads us to act according to the revealed will of the Lord.

13 Courage and Witness

To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints, and also for me, that words may be given to me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains, that I may declare it boldly, as I ought to speak. Ephesians 6:18-20

Witnesses all

Let's note three things about this passage. First, Paul understood that he was called to bear witness for Christ. And if Paul was called to that mission, so are we, because he commands all who read his letters to imitate him as he imitates Jesus (1 Cor. 11:1). So, like Paul, we're called to bear witness to Jesus Christ.

Second, notice that Paul understood that even this, even his bearing witness, was a work of God through him. God would have to give him the words he needed in any situation. Paul didn't memorize simplistic Gospel outlines or pat answers to common objections. He understood that every witnessing situation is unique and requires different words for different people. And he knew that, as Jesus had promised (Lk. 12:8-12), God would supply the words he needed in each situation. Certainly he had to prepare himself, through study and walking with the Lord. But he understood that, like the *courage* to bear witness, the actual *work* of bearing witness is a work of God.

Finally, note that the prospect of bearing witness for Christ was a bit scary to Paul. After all, he was sitting in prison writing this letter because he had been faithful in his witness for Christ. It cost Paul dearly, on several occasions, to stand his ground and proclaim the Gospel when people were pressing near, shouting him down, and threatening harm. Bearing witness for Christ can entail a certain amount of risk. The courage to bear witness comes from God, as a result of our prayers.

Defeated witnesses

Many Christians are defeated in witnessing situations, and that for one of three reasons. First, they don't recognize the situations as they arise. They don't hear the longing in the heart of a co-worker for some relief from guilt or fear. They don't think about Jesus and the promises of God when others are prattling on about their plans and dreams. They're just not paying attention to the open doors of opportunity God presents to them. If they spent more time focusing on the promises of God and getting to know Him, they would be able to feel His nudges when doors of opportunity begin to crack open, and they would be ready with a timely word and an answer explaining the hope that is within them.

Some Christians don't bear witness, even when they see the opportunity, because they're afraid they won't "get it right." This is nothing less than presuming to do the Spirit's work for Him. His job is to supply the words; ours is to open our mouths and start talking. If you're growing in your relationship with the Lord and always moving toward His promises, you won't lack for things to say whenever a witnessing opportunity arises.

Finally, some Christians don't witness because they're afraid of what others will think or say. But that is simply to fear men rather than God, to love your comfort rather than to walk the risky path of obedience.

Do the thing you fear!

The key to knowing courage in the face of witnessing opportunities is simple, as Jim Kennedy used to say, "Do the thing you fear." Afraid to bear witness? Start bearing witness, and watch how the Lord shows up to provide the words, fill your heart with love and courage, and enable you to do something beyond what you've ever believed or done before. God promises we will be able to influence others, and He's given us the Gospel to that end. And He commands us to be witnesses and make disciples. All that's remaining for Christian courage to flow in a witnessing situation is to do the thing you fear. Start the conversation, and you'll be surprised at the courage, clarity, conviction, and persuasiveness you are able to show.

Next steps: This week, make a point to initiate a conversation with someone in your sphere of influence for the express purpose of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Will you do this? After you've done it, share your experience with some Christian friends, and challenge them to do the same. Keep the challenge going for a year, and you'll find that bearing witness for Christ becomes more a part of who you are in Him.

For reflection

1. "Bearing witness for Christ can entail a certain amount of risk. The courage to bear witness comes from God, as a result of our prayers." Have you found this to be true in your own life? How do you deal with the fear that rises when you think about bearing witness to Christ?

2. Use the space below to make notes from your reading. Use the "additional resources" following lesson 14, or do some research of your own at colsoncenter.org:

For prayer:

14 Courage and Christian Life

And Peter answered him, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." He said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat... Matthew 14:28, 29

Lights in the darkness

Living as a Christian requires courage in every situation of our lives. God intends us to stand out like lights in the dark world of sin. He has called us to be holy, and has put His Gospel into our mouths. He has sent His Spirit to live within us, and that Spirit leads us into the hope of glory which makes all things new in our lives. If we're focusing on the promises of God, living obediently in the power of His Spirit, and bearing witness in all our words and deeds, we're going to stand out from the rest of the world. And we'll need real Christian courage, every day, to live like this for the Lord.

Living as a Christian is a lot like Peter wanting to walk on the water. He'd never done that before, and it didn't seem particularly likely that he could do so now. Indeed, it might be risky and even dangerous to try it. Nevertheless, focused on Jesus and obedient to His command, he stepped out of that little boat and began walking on the water to Jesus. Now *that* took real Christian courage.

Consider Peter

Let's examine the process of living in Christian courage. Think of Peter: First, you imagine yourself doing something, or being something, that you've never dared to ask or think before. I doubt Peter had ever even wondered what it might be like to walk on the water. But he saw Jesus on the water. He saw Jesus doing something, being something, that he dared to believe could be true of himself as well. Jesus is the culmination of all the promises of God (2 Cor. 1:20). The more we look to Jesus, the more clearly we see Jesus and envision ourselves with Him, doing what He does, the more we, too, will begin to dream of things we've never done before, things that will make us more like Jesus.

Second, Peter cleared his plan with the Lord: "Lord, if it is you, command me..." Whatever it is you feel the Lord is leading or calling you to do, or whatever you envision yourself doing, even if it's exceeding abundantly beyond anything you've ever dared to ask or think before, check it out with the Scriptures and compare it with the promises of God. Is this bold step I'm envisioning, for which I will need real Christian courage, consistent with the promises and commands of the Lord?

Then, determine the next steps you need to take to begin moving *toward* the promises – toward *Jesus* – and *in obedience* to what the Lord has commanded you. Think small: Get up, put my hands on the side of the boat, first leg over, second leg over, stand up straight, take a step... Make plans to take real steps which mark out a path of obedience toward becoming more like Jesus. You can be bold taking small steps, and, as you do, your courage will grow and prepare you for the later steps to come.

If, that is, you can keep your eyes on Jesus. Don't let the situation make you afraid. Don't let the doubts and discouragement of your timid friends keep you from going forward. Don't be shackled by your previous experience or lack thereof. Get out of the boat! Get moving toward Jesus! And watch what the Spirit of God will do to embolden and encourage you for a life of daily obedience to the Lord.

Living courageously

Yeah, living courageously can be risky, and sometimes even costly. But who wants to live timid lives of small faith? Not me! And hopefully, not you, either. The waves and storms of this world are no match for the courageous Christian – eyes squarely focused on Jesus and His promises, clear in his understanding of what the Lord commands, and determined to take the daily small steps of obedience from which Christian courage flows for the exceeding abundantly more and more that Jesus can do in and through us.

Additional Resources and Activities on Courage

Order your copy of Gary A. Haugen's [Good News about Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World](#), from our online store. You may also download the free PDF of T. M. Moore's ViewPoint series, "[Kingdom Courage](#)."

Here are some resources to get you started working for a renewal of virtue in our day:

Charles Colson, "[Kilts, Clans, and Courage: The Heroism of Braveheart](#)"

Charles Colson, "[My Friend Jack Kemp](#)"

Charles Colson, "[The Courage to Just Say No!](#)"

Ray Cotton, "[Where Have All Our Heroes Gone?](#)"

Gregory Koukl, "[Tolerance, or Lack of Courage?](#)"

Robin Philips, "[Taming the Storm with Manly Strength: The Courage of Saint Columbanus](#)"

Patrick Henry Reardon, "[Homer, Sex & Bungee Jumping: The Lost World of Courage](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some actions you can take this week to begin a movement renewing Christian virtue:

1. Talk with some of your Christian friends about this topic. Do they agree that Christians today lack the courage of their convictions? Do they find themselves caught up in a spiral of silence? How might you pray for and help one another to have more courage to bear witness for Christ?
2. Ask your pastor to talk about Christian courage as part of his sermons. What can he do to use the pulpit to encourage and equip the members of your church for more courageous living?

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some Christian friends: "Why do outspoken atheists and unbelievers seem to be so much more courageous about their convictions than most of the Christians we know?"

Prudence

Living Skillfully

The “wisdom literature” designates a section of the Old Testament that focuses on everyday living unto the Lord. Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and many of the Psalms immerse us in the day-to-day situations of life and teach us how to engage them with a view to serving God and loving our neighbor. The wisdom literature can be very practical, but that doesn’t mean it’s always easy – as anyone who has scratched his head over Solomon’s strange musings in Ecclesiastes can tell you.

From the focus of the wisdom literature, we can understand that wisdom is nothing more than skillfully living according to purposes of God. When, at the beginning of his reign, Solomon prayed for wisdom, he wasn’t interested in being perceived as some kind of sage or philosophical savant. He simply wanted to rule the people well. And in order to do that, he knew that he would need wisdom.

Wisdom is not much in fashion these days. Children don’t study wisdom in school; they study efficiency. Churches don’t spend much time teaching about wisdom, either. They’re too focused on our felt needs for significance, community, and so forth. Pop culture scorns wisdom, preferring sentimentality and sensuality instead.

But wisdom is a primary focus of Scripture. It answers the question Chuck Colson raised in his book, *How Now Shall We Live?* The way we should live is according to the plan and purposes of God, in every area of life, for the glory of God and the benefit of our neighbors. In a very real sense, wisdom is simply the Christian worldview. We are wise when we are living according to the Christian worldview as revealed in Scripture and testified to throughout the generations of Church history. If we would be wise, therefore, we need to take up the study of Christian worldview.

In general, they who exhibit the most skill in any profession or craft are the ones who are most likely to succeed. The most skillful pitcher is the one who wins the Cy Young. The most skillful lawyer gets the best cases. The most skillful (politician) wins the election.

If Christians could improve in this virtue, the virtue of wisdom, how might that help them to stand out as a people to be admired and emulated? Moses told the children of Israel that if they lived for God in every area of life, their wisdom would shine before the neighboring nations: “See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of all peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut. 4:5, 6).

If we have the courage to live for Christ, wisdom will be the hallmark of all our daily life. The world needs to see the wisdom of God, for the “wisdom” of men is wearing thin.

15 The Value of Wisdom

...to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding of the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Colossians 2:2, 3

What would you ask?

Early on in his reign King Solomon was given the opportunity to request of God whatever he might like. Given such an opportunity, what would you do? Solomon asked the Lord for wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:3-14). He might have requested anything – wealth, fame, the destruction of all his enemies, long life. But he asked for wisdom. Evidently Solomon understood that nothing is as valuable in this life as having the wisdom of God with which to serve Him.

Because he asked of God wisdom, God granted it to him, and with wisdom, much else besides. The wisdom of God is a precious treasure. It is nothing less than skill in living according to His divine purpose and plan. Wisdom is the ability to grasp and demonstrate the mind of Christ, the heart of God, and the life of the Spirit in every aspect of life. Nothing reflects the character of Christ as much as the wisdom God gives us so that we might serve Him and others. Thus, to gain the wisdom of God should be the goal of every one of the followers of Jesus Christ.

Wisdom crying

In Proverbs 8 the Wisdom of God identifies Himself* as the Servant of the Lord. Wisdom cries out to all who will listen, offering them the opportunity to gain the benefits He offers. This Wisdom is none other than the Word of God, the second Person of the Trinity, Who came among us as Jesus of Nazareth. And just as Jesus called all the world to turn to Him and find the blessings and wisdom of God, so the Word of God in Proverbs 8 holds out the benefits we might know from devoting ourselves to the pursuit of wisdom. Wisdom is gained through hearing the Word of God, submitting to the Word of God, and being transformed by the Word of God.

What are the benefits of wisdom? From Wisdom we may learn whatever things are noble, good, and true (vv. 6, 7). Wisdom can guide us in the path of righteousness and enable us to understand the knowledge of God and His Word (vv. 8-11). Wisdom leads to prudence, discretion, goodness, humility, and profitable speech (vv. 12-15). It is the skill by which rulers govern and justice is obtained within a nation (vv. 16-20). Wisdom is thus of great benefit, not only to the one who possesses it, but to all the people who have contact with the wise person.

A treasure to be desired

Thus wisdom is greatly to be desired, for in possessing wisdom we actually possess the very character of God Himself, as He lives and works through us to bless all those we meet. All who keep the way of wisdom know blessing, fullness of life, and favor with God (vv. 32-35). Solomon understood the value of wisdom, and he prayed earnestly that God might grant it to him. But while God granted Solomon wisdom, wisdom did not come to him as a parcel from heaven, but as the result of a diligent quest to gain what God had promised.

Wisdom calls to us as well, pleading with us to learn the ways of God and to avoid the paths of folly, sin, and death. We, too, should make the pursuit of wisdom the highest priority in our walk with the Lord. Let us follow Solomon in his acquisition of this precious virtue, so that we might gain wisdom as he did.

**Wisdom is portrayed in a feminine mode in Proverbs 8, but this is only because the noun, "wisdom," is a feminine noun in the Hebrew language, as also in the Greek language. All such abstract nouns are in a feminine form in Scripture, but this does not have anything to do with gender as we think of it. Hence, we may confidently assume that "Wisdom" in Proverbs 8 is our Lord Jesus Himself.*

16 The Beginning of Wisdom

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. Psalm 111:10

Loving God...and fearing Him

We read of Solomon, at the beginning of his reign, that he loved the Lord and walked in all the statutes of the Law of God (1 Kgs. 3:3). Loving God is one side of what we might call the gold coin of affections, defining how we are to relate to the Lord.

To love Him is one side; to fear Him is the other.

As the Lord wrote through Moses, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him...” (Deut. 10:12). As surely as Solomon loved the Lord, he must have feared him as well. Fearing the Lord is the starting-point for gaining the wisdom of God; if we do not love and fear Him, He will not give us that which is most characteristic of Him. Most of us have an idea of what it means to love the Lord. But what is involved in fearing Him?

The fear of God

The fear of God is more than simply a kind of reverence for Him. It’s not just being in awe of God, although it certainly includes that. We fear God when we have a proper sense of His immensity and might. In our day the tendency is to bring God down to our size, to make Him our Friend and Counselor, but to neglect to see Him as our Creator and sovereign Lord, as the Father Who disciplines and the Judge Who purges.

The Scriptures teach that all the vast cosmos is contained within God. He exercises power and authority over everything that He has made, so that nothing exists or continues to exist without His direct supervision and care. When we realize just how great, vast, and powerful God is, fear of Him will begin to rise within us.

But fear of the Lord goes beyond even that. To fear God is, literally, to be afraid of Him. For when we know God in His immensity and power, we will also begin to know Him in His purity and justice. Confronted with the purity and justice of this immense and all-powerful God, we will see ourselves as altogether unworthy of anything but judgment, wrath, and destruction at His hands. Thus we will fear God because we know what we deserve from Him, and we know what He is capable of doing to bring justice against guilty sinners.

What God can do

Further, even though we are redeemed through our Lord Jesus Christ, we continue to sin and stray from the path God has marked out for us. Thus we become vulnerable to His discipline, which, the writer of Hebrews reminds us, is never pleasant (Heb. 12:11). We fear God as we should when we understand His immensity and power, tremble before His holiness and justice, and dread His discipline against our daily sins.

We will not get to wisdom apart from the fear of God. Yes, we must love the Lord, for we know how much He loves us. But we must also fear Him, for only then will we properly humble ourselves before Him, so that He might give us all His most precious gifts.

If we would be wise, we must learn to love the Lord and to fear Him, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Next steps: Outline your own approach to sustaining a healthy fear of God. Share this with another Christian and ask for his or her response. Talk about fearing God as the beginning of wisdom.

For reflection

1. “As surely as Solomon loved the Lord, he must have feared him as well. Fearing the Lord is the starting-point for gaining the wisdom of God; if we do not love and fear Him, He will not give us that which is most characteristic of Him.” Do you agree that it is important to fear the Lord? Do you hear much talk – teaching or preaching – about fearing the Lord?

2. Do some more reading on the fear of God by going to colsoncenter.org and typing the words, “fearing God” into the Search Colson Library search box. Make some notes below:

For prayer:

17 To the Law and the Testimonies!

Solomon loved the LORD, walking in the statutes of David his father... 1 Kings 3:3

To make us wise

The Law of God is a much-neglected resource for gaining the wisdom of the Lord. While the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, real growth in wisdom comes from steady exposure to and immersion in the wise and holy Law of God.

David wrote that the Law of God is able to make even simple men wise (Ps. 19:7). God explained through Moses that His Law would make the people of Israel a nation wise and to be admired: “Keep [these statutes and rules] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’” (Deut. 4:6). Because Solomon loved and feared God, it was natural for him to turn to the Law of God in order to gain the wisdom he sought for serving the Lord and the people of Israel.

Solomon, Jesus, and the Law

Let us assume that, in turning to the Law of God as his father David had, Solomon followed the protocol assigned to all the kings of Israel (Deut. 17:18-20). This would have required Solomon to prepare a draft of the Law of God in his own handwriting, to submit that draft to the priests for review and approval, and then to keep that draft of the Law with him at all times. As king Solomon was expected to read from the Law daily, to learn the fear of God from the Law, to allow his heart to be shaped in humility by all that the Law teaches, and to walk in the paths of righteousness marked out therein.

Even the Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings, followed this same protocol, as He Himself tells us in Matthew 5:17. He, the very Wisdom of God incarnate, perfectly fulfilled all the Law of God, and determined that it should be foundational for teaching in His Kingdom. We who, having been redeemed by our Lord Jesus Christ, are now a “royal priesthood” unto the Lord (1 Pt. 2:9, 10) must make it our business to seek the wisdom of God in His Law, so that we might walk in the same path that Solomon and Jesus walked (1 Jn. 2:1-6).

Repenting of our neglect

If we would be wise, we must repent of having neglected the Law of God so long. Those who neglect the Law of God will find that even their prayers can run afoul of the Lord (Prov. 28:9). But if we apply ourselves to the Law of God, reading in and meditating on it daily, and seeking by all means to walk in its holy and righteous and good path (Rom. 7:12), then we will find that the wisdom of God will be more readily with us in everything we do.

The wisdom of God is that skill in living that reflects His indwelling presence in our lives. We are on the right path to wisdom when we nurture the fear of the Lord along with our love for Him. And when we daily submit to the Law of God, and, indeed, to all the teaching of God’s Word, we begin to discover wisdom from the Lord for every aspect of our lives, every day of our lives.

Next steps: Spend this day meditating on Psalm 1 and Matthew 5:17-19. At the end of the day, complete this statement: “I need to become more familiar with God’s Law because...” Pray your completed statement back to the Lord, and begin working on it next morning.

18 Study the Creation

“I the Preacher have been king over Israel in Jerusalem. And I applied my heart to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven.” Ecclesiastes 1:12, 13

A quest, not an endowment

Solomon asked God to grant him wisdom so that he might rule the people of Israel justly and well. Solomon feared God and feared what God might do if he failed in his calling to rule as Israel’s king. Thus, he had a good start in gaining what he sought, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

God granted Solomon’s request for wisdom, but, apparently, not as a sudden endowment from on high. Solomon did not wake up from his sleep suddenly the wisest man alive. According to his own account in the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon had to seek the wisdom of God by all the means of revelation God had provided. So Solomon became a student of the Law of God, following the practice of Israel’s kings of writing a copy of the law and meditating on it day by day. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and daily meditation in God’s Word describes the path wisdom would take in our lives.

Wisdom as wide as the world

But Solomon did not stop with studying the Word of God only. He also became a student of the world of creation. Solomon understood, as David taught, that God was making Himself and His glory known in the things He has made. Thus, Solomon expected to be able to discern the Lord and His wisdom by becoming a student of the world around him – creation and culture alike.

Solomon’s father, King David, had written of the works of creation, “All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (Ps. 145:10-12). Solomon knew that God has hidden His glory in the world of creation, and with His glory, His wisdom. The creatures around us and the patterns of the created world reveal much about God and His character and purpose. The more familiar we become with these, and the more we ponder them in the light of God’s Word, the more we may expect to discern the Lord and His will from the things He has made.

Solomon understood that, as a king who sought the wisdom of God, it was his responsibility to seek out, through the study of creation, whatever God might be pleased to reveal there of His glory and wisdom (Prov. 25:2). The creation is a vast library of information and example on how to be wise and to live for the glory of God. Knowing this, Solomon took up the study of created things – trees, plants, beasts, birds, reptiles, and fish (1 Kgs. 4:33). His proverbs offer many wise insights into the ways of God, revealed to Solomon through created things.

Jesus, creation, and wisdom

Jesus, following Solomon’s example, also pointed to birds, flowers, fields, seeds, and more in order to draw the attention of His hearers to the wisdom of God encoded there. Jesus explained, by the examples of creation, the mysterious ways and wonders of God’s Kingdom.

Becoming wise begins with the fear of God and devotion to His Word. But growth in wisdom increases through an ongoing, everyday study of the world around us. If we would be wise like Solomon and Jesus, we must take up the study of the creation, devoting ourselves through reading, study, contemplation, and conversation, to discerning the wisdom of God as revealed in the things He has made.

Next steps: Choose something from the creation around you, something immediately accessible for you to observe. Watch it for a while – a slowly meandering creek, the night sky, birds at the feeder, the leaves on a tree. Make a stab at discerning the wisdom of God visible in this item. Share what you learn with someone else.

For reflection

1. “Solomon did not stop with studying the Word of God only. He also became a student of the world of creation. Solomon understood, as David taught, that God was making Himself and His glory known in the things He has made. Thus, Solomon expected to be able to discern the Lord and His wisdom by becoming a student of the world around him – creation and culture alike.” Have you ever thought about the creation as a source of wisdom? If no, why not? If yes, give an example:

2. Read a bit more on “natural revelation” or “creational theology” at colsoncenter.org. Be prepared to talk about how studying the creation can help us to grow in wisdom.

For prayer:

19 Wisdom in Culture

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt...He also spoke 3,000 proverbs and his songs were 1,005. 1 Kings 4:29, 30, 32

Culture and glory

Solomon's father, King David, had written that it pleased God to give gifts to all kinds of men, so that He Himself might inhabit those gifts – presumably, to manifest His glory and wisdom (Ps. 68:18). Accordingly, in his quest to gain the wisdom of God, Solomon set himself to studying and creating culture.

This only makes sense, for, since no human society has ever existed without culture, it would be impossible to rule Israel well apart from some understanding of how culture should be used to encourage and express the wisdom and glory of God. Solomon understood that works of culture have a powerful ability to shape and serve a nation; but they must be used in a manner consistent with what God has revealed in His Law if they are to aid in realizing the wisdom of God. So, just as Solomon studied the creation in pursuit of the wisdom of God, he also set his mind to understanding culture, and set his hands to bringing wise cultural artifacts to the people of Israel.

A man of culture

Solomon's cultural interests and achievements were many and great. He understood the ways of poetry, music, and folk wisdom, as 1 Kings 4:32 makes clear by referring to his penchant for composing songs and proverbs. Apparently he believed such cultural expressions could be important means of communicating the wisdom of God. In pithy proverbial sayings and memorable songs, God is able to encapsulate much wisdom that can serve us in all kinds of ways. Many have found that, by reading one chapter a day from the book of Proverbs, they are able to learn the wisdom of God and practice it more consistently.

But Solomon's engagement with culture did not stop with music and musings; the King of Israel sought the wisdom of God in great works of public art and architecture. We see the detail with which Solomon attended to the building of God's temple, using only the finest materials according to the most lavish of plans in order to create a workable and glorious structure for the worship of the Lord (1 Kgs. 6).

He also built a great palace, gardens, parks, pools, vineyards, stables, and houses. He testifies that he was guided by wisdom in building all these things (Eccl. 2:3), and so we can believe that, like the temple, there was much of the wisdom of God to be observed in the cultural achievements of Solomon.

Culture-making

In his book, *Making Culture*, Andy Crouch insists that every believer is a culture-maker; thus, all of us have abundant opportunities to seek and to manifest the wisdom of God in our day-to-day lives with and in culture. Everything from the words we speak to the food we eat, the way we dress, how we do our work, our participation in the life of the community, our preferences in reading, study, films, and avocations – all these are forms of culture in which we may learn and express the wisdom of God.

But if we would show God's wisdom through our cultural activities, we must be willing, like Solomon, to understand the ways of culture and to bring our cultural lives under the searchlight of God's Word. We can learn much about the wisdom of God through culture, and we can show His wisdom through our cultural lives to the people around us. But we must study carefully if we would gain the wisdom of God here.

Next steps: Can you think of a film you've seen that communicated something of wisdom? Talk with a friend about this as an example of how we might learn wisdom by becoming more aware of the culture around us.

For reflection

1. “Solomon’s father, King David, had written that it pleased God to give gifts to all kinds of men, so that He Himself might inhabit those gifts, presumably, to manifest His glory and wisdom (Ps. 68:18). Accordingly, in his quest to gain the wisdom of God, Solomon set himself to studying and creating culture.” Make a quick list of the different aspects of culture in which you are daily engaged. Meditate on 1 Corinthians 10:31. How can the culture you use bring glory to God?

2. Think about some aspects of culture that seem to be a source of wisdom – poetry, for example, or even film. See if you can find some reading at colsoncenter.org to support your view.

For prayer:

20 The Ways of the Conscience

And people of all nations came to bear the wisdom of Solomon, and from all the kings of the earth, who had heard of his wisdom.
1 Kings 4:34

People-watching

Even a cursory reading of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs – the greatest literary achievements of King Solomon – will reveal that Solomon knew a good deal about the ways, longings, hopes, fears, and needs of men and women. He knew that God had made men in His own image, after His likeness, with the ability to know the Lord and to understand the world and life in ways consistent with God’s design (cf. Eccl. 3:10, 11). Solomon seems to have concluded, therefore, that he could learn something about the wisdom of God by watching people in their everyday lives. By observing others, and trying to learn from their ways, Solomon believed he would grow in the wisdom he sought so earnestly from the Lord.

If we recall that wisdom is nothing more than “skill in living according to the purpose and plan of God”, then it makes sense to think that the actions of men and women, arising from the choices of their consciences, can lead us to gain the wisdom of God. Some people are better than others at living wisely, and it is a good idea to be able to identify wise people and learn from them as much as we can.

All kinds of people

Solomon saw God’s wisdom in all kinds of people. In Song of Songs he shows us how God, in His wisdom, teaches men and women the importance of love and guides them in expressing love to one another. At the same time, Solomon warns us, in both Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, of the danger of cheapening love by making it nothing more than a sensual experience. Love between men and women should be like the love God has for His people – pure, eternal, self-giving, mutually edifying, devoted, and engaging the whole person. Anything less than this, Solomon knew, was but a cheap imitation of love.

He must also have observed many friends relating to one another, for he had much to say about being a soul friend with another person. Solomon also warned readers about the bad examples of sluggards, cheats, deceivers, adulterers, and those who play fast and loose with the truth. He watched businessmen, rulers, parents, and people in a wide range of situations, in each case studying their actions in order to gain the wisdom of God from them. He extolled the example of a godly wife, a wise citizen, and a devoted ruler. He saw what happened when people obeyed God’s Word, and he warned against the “folly” of thinking we know better than God about how we ought to live.

Observing the wise

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means being a learner, and we can learn much about the wisdom of God from watching wise people who know the Lord and are faithful in serving Him. The more such people we have in our lives, and the more carefully we observe them, the greater will be the likelihood that we will understand how to live in the wisdom of God.

When our quest for wisdom is grounded in the love and fear of God, framed by the Law of God, and devoted to the service of God, then we may expect that diligent study and careful observation will yield additional insights into the wisdom of God from creation, culture, and the works of human consciences. If we would gain the wisdom of God, we must resort to all these sources with the keenest of interest and devotion.

Next steps: Ask some Christian friends about their heroes. What have they learned about God’s wisdom from these folks?

21 Keep Your Motives Right

So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem. Also my wisdom remained with me. And whatsoever my eyes desired, I did not keep from them. Ecclesiastes 2:9, 10

A good start...

Solomon's purpose for seeking the wisdom of God was so that he might serve the people of Israel well (1 Kgs. 3:9). His original desire to be wise expressed his longing to be a good king, like his father had been, and to serve the flock of God as a faithful shepherd. This is the proper motive for seeking the wisdom of God – that we might honor Him and serve others, thus fulfilling the twin commandments to love God and our neighbors.

Wisdom, you will recall, is only Jesus Christ living His life in and through us; therefore we would expect that, given His example, the only proper motive for seeking the wisdom of God is to serve others with His love and truth (Phil. 2:5-11).

Solomon began well, and for the greater part of his reign he accomplished the purposes of God according to the plans and wisdom God gave him. But a turn came at some point, as Solomon records it for us in Ecclesiastes 2. There, even though he mentions that he was still operating out of the wisdom God had given him, it is painfully obvious that Solomon's motives had begun to change.

...but then, disaster

Read Ecclesiastes 2 aloud and you will be overwhelmed with the number of times the first person personal pronoun comes into play – “I”, “me”, “my”, and so forth. As he prospered, Solomon seems to have begun thinking more about himself, his pleasure, and his own interests and needs than those of the people of Israel. Lost in self-seeking, Solomon opened the doors of Israel to idolatry, adultery, self-indulgence, moral compromise, and spiritual disaster (1 Kgs. 11:1-13). How easy it is for even the wisest among us to succumb to the temptations of sin!

When it comes to seeking the wisdom of God, we must strive to keep our motives pure. Wisdom like the wisdom of Christ will always seek the interests and needs of others first; it will never give in to base self-interest or to the indulgences of the flesh. Wisdom will always want to honor God and walk the path marked out by His Word. Wisdom will keep in mind the good of the larger community and will deny any temptation that encourages mere self-seeking. As long as our motive is pure and our quest for wisdom diligent, we can expect that God will meet us, provide for us, guide us into His wisdom, and use us in the service of His people in many wonderful ways.

Get wisdom!

Solomon believed that he could be wise, wise enough to serve the people of Israel as God Himself might do. He sought the wisdom of God by every means – through prayer and the Word of God, by learning the ways of creation, culture, and human relations, and by contributing as much as he could to the wellbeing of the people he served. But when he failed to keep his eye on God, Solomon's wisdom turned to folly, and all his labors on behalf of the people of Israel led only to national dissolution and despair.

Our own nation is already struggling to keep from succumbing to despair. More than ever, the world is looking for wise men and women to give it hope and lead it to safer and more peaceable times. We can become the wise people our generation desperately needs. Let us pursue wisdom earnestly; all the while waiting in prayer for the Lord to search and scour our motives, laying bear the desires of our hearts – lest, like Solomon, we see our quest for wisdom come to disaster and our practice of wisdom become a cause of shame.

Renewing Virtue

Next steps: Develop a plan for gaining the wisdom of God, including all the means mentioned in this study. Share your plan with a friend and challenge him or her to develop a plan as well. Pray together, and meet often, to encourage one another in this effort.

For reflection

1. “Wisdom, you will recall, is only Jesus Christ living His life in and through us; therefore we would expect that, given His example, the only proper motive for seeking the wisdom of God is to serve others with His love and truth (Phil. 2:5-11).” Meditate on Proverbs 4:20-27. What do we need to keep an eye on in order to make sure we can live wisely like Jesus? How do you propose to do that?

2. Read one of the articles on wisdom from the additional resources provided at the end of this section. Make some notes below to discuss what you learn about wisdom from this article:

For prayer:

Additional Resources and Activities on Wisdom

Derek Kidner has written a very helpful guide to the wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Order your copy of [The Wisdom of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes: An Introduction to Wisdom Literature](#) from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you grow in wisdom:

Order your copy of Gary A. Haugen's [Good News about Injustice: A Witness of Courage in a Hurting World](#), from our online store. You may also download the free PDF of T. M. Moore's ViewPoint series, "[Kingdom Courage](#)."

Here are some resources to help you grown in wisdom:

Charles Colson, "[Bibles on Board: Faith in the Workplace](#)"

Charles Colson, "[Sorely Needed Wisdom](#)"

Robert K. Johnston, "[The Wisdom of the Coen Brothers](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Many Books](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Wisdom, Knowledge, and Service](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Wise Government](#)"

Diane Vincent, "[From Information to Wisdom](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some actions you can take this week to increase in wisdom:

1. How do your friends define wisdom? Ask a few of them – Christians and non-Christians. Do they have the same view of wisdom that Scripture does? Share the idea that wisdom is simply “skill in living.” Can they agree? Ask: How can we grow in such wisdom? Follow the conversation as the Lord leads.
2. Talk to some church leaders about the importance of wisdom. Ask them how the church is working to help the members of your congregation become wise. How do they assess the members for progress in wisdom?

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some Christian friends: “Moses said that the nations around Israel would admire their wisdom. Do you think the unbelievers around us today admire the wisdom we Christians are displaying?”

Temperance

The Lines Are Our Friends?

One of my all-time favorite TV commercials begins with a little girl at her desk in school, writing away at something, while the teacher walks up and down the aisles repeating, “Stay within the lines; the lines are your friends.” At one point the little girl scribbles like mad across the lines of her paper and looks up, as a wicked smile spreads across her cherubic face.

Cut to the future. Our little redhead is driving like a banshee across the countryside in her new car. She’s having a ball – no speed limits, no roads, no nothing to restrain her free spirit. The teacher’s words continue to resonate in the background: “Stay within the lines; the lines are your friends.” But she only throws her head back and laughs wildly as she presses the pedal to the metal one more time.

I’ve mentioned this commercial to several of my friends, all of whom have seen it and found it amusing – an interesting way of selling a snazzy car. What almost none of them have noticed, however, is that our grown-up line-transgressor is driving furiously across someone’s property wearing a wedding dress. Is she on her way to her wedding? If so, God help that groom. Is she speeding away from her wedding? That wouldn’t surprise us. For many in this generation, the lines are definitely not our friends. Not the lines provided by traditional values or institutions, nor those held out by religion or history. No lines. No limits. Ain’t skeered.

Rather than encouraging the virtue of temperance – self-control – our age has become the age of *intemperance*, in which all restraints are challenged and discarded for the “virtue” of self-actualization, whatever that may mean.

“Mere anarchy is loosed upon the land,” Yeats wrote at the beginning of the last century. In many ways, he could see where the growing intemperance of the day would lead. The tent cities of “Occupy Wall Street” are for many in our day a symbol of our free-spirited aspirations and unbridled hopes. Attempts to introduce restraint and moderation on such free spirits have been met with vulgarity, vandalism, and violence. The lines, we are to understand, are definitely not our friends. But we will destroy all freedom if we do not learn self-control. Without temperance – living within the lines and precepts of the Word of God – human beings are left to individual aspirations and whims, a moral and ethical shark-feed of “every man for himself” where the only restraints are those that conduce to individual gratification and survival.

Happily, we’re not there yet – not where the children of Israel ended up during the period of the judges, with every man doing what seemed right in his own eyes. The wisdom of God still exerts some force on our free-spirited age, which is breathing the rapidly-evaporating fumes of a previous generation in which temperance and self-control were still virtues.

But how will this generation learn that the lines really are our friends, unless the members of the Christian community embrace the virtue of temperance and demonstrate its power to guide us in the way of beauty, goodness, and truth? Before temperance becomes a thing to be scorned, Christians need to rediscover the power of this cardinal virtue to preserve what is good, define what is evil, and empower us to choose rightly between them.

22 Two Paths

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control... Galatians 5:22, 23

The root of all our problems

At the root of all the problems facing humankind and the cosmos is our inability to practice self-control. I say the lack of self-control is the *root* of all our ills, because it was precisely this which caused Adam and Eve to fall into sin, bringing death and corruption to the whole creation. Faced with an emotionally appealing proposal, which to choose could be easily rationalized, Adam and Eve rebelled against God and His Word, let their hearts and minds overrule their consciences, and fell through temptation into sin and death. And the rest, as they say, is history (Gen. 3).

German theologian Helmut Thielicke defined temptation in this way: “To be in temptation means to be constantly in the situation of wanting to be untrue to God. It means being constantly on the point of freeing ourselves from God.” This being so, it’s no wonder that self-control, or temperance, is included among the gifts of the Holy Spirit. For without temperance we will be unable to resist the many temptations which confront us day by day. We will always be falling through temptation into sin, guilt, shame, and spiritual setback unless we cultivate the ability to resist temptation through the practice of temperance.

To fall or to grow?

In Psalm 73 the prophet Asaph outlined a textbook analysis of temptation and how to deal with it. Whenever temptation comes we will travel one of two paths. Either we will, like Adam and Eve, *fall through* temptation into sin. Or we will, like Asaph in Psalm 73, *grow through* temptation into greater maturity in the Lord. That we are going to be tempted is certain. Martin Luther is reported to have said, concerning temptation, “You can’t stop the birds from flying over your head.” Paul indicates that we should be prepared to deal with every kind of temptation, and to find the “way of escape” *through* temptation which God has provided (1 Cor. 10:13). Luther continued his musing on temptation: “You can’t stop the birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair.”

Asaph’s temptation

And that’s what we want to do. The practice of temperance involves recognizing and resisting temptation by seeking the ways of escape God has made available to us. Asaph was confronted by temptation pretty much the way we are – right smack in the middle of everyday life. Here he was, the worship leader of Israel, and, as he’s going along on his way, he encounters a party of rich people off to do who knows what. He observed their lavish dress and extravagant manner. He heard their laughter and crude conversation. As he reflected on rich people he had known, it seemed to him that they were never in trouble or distress; they always have ample means to take care of whatever they need. They are proud of their attainments and not shy about parading their wealth before the watching world. They don’t worry about what God might think about them – what could He do, anyway? Rich people, Asaph mused, have got it made.

And what about me? he continued. Here I am, the servant of the Lord. I knock myself out in daily discipline so that I remain faithful to the Lord. I get no respect from the people I serve. I got nothing: “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning” (vv. 13, 14).

But just as Asaph was about to *vocalize* his complaint, it hit him. He was getting ready to be disloyal to God. He had encountered temptation, in the form of covetousness, and he was just about to step on to the wrong path. As he says at the beginning of his psalm, “my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped” (v. 2). But at just the moment he was about to fall into sin’s trap, Asaph practiced the discipline of temperance.

23 What's at Stake

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” Matthew 6:33

Throw it all away?

Faced with a powerful temptation, the prophet Asaph “nearly slipped” and stumbled into sin (Ps. 73:2). He observed the rich and was envious of their leisurely lifestyle. He heard them mocking God and plowing ahead with their agendas, rebellious and proud. He observed this parade of vanity and God-mockery, and, for a moment, he wanted to sign up.

But Asaph was a man devoted to God. He had been appointed by David as leader of the choirs and worship in the temple that was to be built. Now, under David's son Solomon, he had begun his service, leading the people into the presence of God and encouraging them in the work of His Kingdom. Would he now throw all that away for a season of sensual delight and self-indulgence?

When we are faced with temptation, large eternal issues are at stake. We might say to ourselves, “It's just a little transgression. No one will get hurt, and nobody will ever know.” And that may be true. Except that God will know, and we will as well. And what we'll know is that, when, in the face of temptation, we fail to exercise self-control and give into to our lusts, we *fall through* temptation into sin, and we frustrate the progress of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

Remember who you are!

When confronted with temptation, we need to remember who we are: We are citizens and ambassadors of a Kingdom not of this world. We have been called to seek that Kingdom and to work for its progress in and through our lives. Every day, in all that we do, if we are seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, we are contributing to the progress of light, truth, grace, goodness, righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

But the moment we give in to temptation, all that gets set aside, while we tread the path of the kingdom of self-indulgence and rebellion against God. Ken Boa once explained that growing in the life of faith is like walking up a down escalator. It's hard work, to be sure, but we can make progress if we stay at it every moment. But as soon as we stop to take a rest, we don't just stand still; we decline. And if we give in to temptation, we don't just stand still; we run down the escalator to whatever depths of disobedience and degradation may capture our hearts and minds and run roughshod over our consciences.

Asaph understood that he was called to serve the King – and not just King Solomon. He was God's man, sent to serve God's people, and devoted to the progress of God's Kingdom within Israel every moment of every day of his life. Faced with temptation, therefore, it was important that he recognize it for what it is – an invitation to rebel against God and undermine, even if ever so slightly, the progress of His Kingdom. From this perspective Asaph could see the situation for what it was; he could understand the strong allure of temptation; and he could see through that allure to the sin, guilt, shame, and setback which lay along the path he was contemplating.

The way of escape

The Apostle Paul promised that, whenever we are faced with temptation, God will provide a way of escape, so that we can bear up and grow through temptation into greater maturity in the Lord (1 Cor. 10:13). We are practicing temperance when we search for that way of escape and direct our steps toward it. Once we have recognized temptation for what it is, and remembered who we are as citizens in the Kingdom of God, then we can begin to practice temperance toward the way of escape through temptation into greater growth in the Lord.

Next steps: Talk with some of your Christian friends about temptation and sin. What's the difference between these? How do they recognize when they're being confronted by temptation? What do they do then?

For reflection

1. "Faced with a powerful temptation, the prophet Asaph 'nearly slipped' and stumbled into sin (Ps. 73:2). He observed the rich and was envious of their leisurely lifestyle. He heard them mocking God and plowing ahead with their agendas, rebellious and proud. He observed this parade of vanity and God-mockery, and, for a moment, he wanted to sign up." What does it mean to seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness? How does sin impede this high calling?

2. Keep reading through the resources on self-control provided at the end of this section. Make some notes so you will be able to bring your reading into the discussion at your next session:

For prayer:

24 Recognizing Temptation

“Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat...” Luke 22:31

Frogs in the kettle

Poor Peter. Like the proverbial frog in the kettle, he failed to recognize what was happening until it was too late. He felt no qualms about lying to a little girl who accused him of having been with Jesus (Lk. 22:56). Then, when some unknown stranger agreed, it was easy enough to say, “No way, man!” So that, just as the rooster was opening his eyes and taking in breath to greet the new day, and a third person confronted him about being associated with Jesus, Peter could say, doubtless with an uneasy laugh, “Man, I don’t know what you’re talking about!” But the crowing of that rooster stabbed Peter in the depths of his soul, “and he went out and wept bitterly.”

How much better if Peter had listened to the Lord’s warning and taken His Word to heart? Jesus had told him that he would deny Him three times. He later instructed Peter to pray, so that he would not enter into temptation. But Peter, confused and excited by the events of the evening, and focused on his own safety and wellbeing, failed to recognize the temptations confronting him, and he fell through temptation into sin and bitter shame and remorse.

Perhaps he should have spent more time meditating on Asaph’s experience in Psalm 73. Asaph “almost slipped” into sin, but he managed to choose the path of *growth through* temptation instead. He practiced the spiritual virtue of temperance in the face of temptation, and he shows us in his psalm how we may practice this virtue as well.

Begin here

Resisting temptation begins with recognizing it. Temptation is not sin. Even Jesus was tempted – more than any of us. But He never sinned. We can’t avoid temptation, as Luther reminded us; however, if we can recognize when it’s beginning to work on us, we can start looking for the way of escape through temptation that leads to the path of greater growth in the Lord.

Since temptation means being at a point of wanting to be disloyal to God, temptation must be something like a road sign which points away from the progress of God’s Kingdom. The more earnest we are in seeking the Kingdom of God, and the more we understand the signposts of progress along that route, the easier it will be to recognize any false detours that suddenly appear before us.

The path God approves

Jesus taught that greatness in the Kingdom of God is related to living and teaching the Law of God (Matt. 5:17-19). Temptation must be anything which encourages us to deny or ignore the Law of God. And since, as Paul explained (Rom. 7:7), the Law gives us the knowledge of sin, the more familiar we are with the Law of God, the easier it will be to recognize whatever might try to divert us from its path. This is why Psalm 1 teaches that the righteous person practices daily meditation in the Law of God, and in all His Word. The Scriptures are given by divine inspiration to equip us for every good work. The Bible guides us along the path God approves, so the more familiar we are with the Bible, the more consistent we are in daily reading, meditation, and study, the easier it’s going to be to recognize temptation when it arises.

Asaph, a devout student of God’s Law, gradually recognized what was happening as he contemplated the ease and mocking lifestyles of the rich. Those thoughts of self-indulgence, that feeling of envy and covetousness, that tinge of resentment against his calling from the Lord – those were the signposts toward the path of sin. And once he recognized what was happening, Asaph began looking for the ways of escape which God provided.

25 We Never Sin Alone

All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. Psalm 73:13-15

Step one

Asaph's victory over temptation began at the moment he recognized what was happening. This was no harmless fit of self-indulgence he was contemplating. It was outright rebellion against God and betrayal of the people he was called to serve! So, rather than voice his resentment and covetous desires, Asaph took to the way of escape and practiced the virtue of temperance.

The first step along the way of escape is to remember that we never sin alone. We might think we can "get away" with some little secret sin, but we are part of a community of the faithful; we are members of the Body of Christ. If I introduce infection to one of my fingers, or poison to my tongue, sooner or later my whole body is going to feel the consequences. It's the same thing with sin. Any time we rebel against the Lord we plant a root of disobedience and corruption in our own souls. Like dandelions, the seeds of rebellion can waft through all our thoughts, feelings, priorities, words, and deeds in ways we cannot predict and may be unable to control. Recall Peter, before the crowing of the rooster.

The consequences of sin

Sin makes a separation between us and the Lord (Is. 59:1, 2). Once that separation begins, it's easy to forget or to rationalize disobeying the Word of God, as Peter did in that courtyard. Further, when we harbor sin in our hearts, God will not listen to our prayers (Ps. 66:18). Until His Spirit searches and convicts us of our sin, and until we confess and repent, we are going to be running down the down escalator at a dangerous pell-mell pace (Ps. 139:23, 24; Jn. 16:8-11; 1 Jn. 1:8-10).

And do we suppose this will not affect the people around us? Can we be spiritually sensitive to the needs of others when our own spirits are dulled by the presence of sin? Will we be looking for opportunities to encourage others in the Lord, or to bear witness to Him, when we know that sin is blackening our souls? Will our worship be as rich and contagious, our joy as full and edifying, or our walk as exemplary as it should be while sin is dragging us around by the collar of our soul? Hardly. We never sin alone. Asaph remembered that he was a fellow citizen with the saints of the Lord, a member of the Body of the Lord's people; he would not allow himself to become a point of entry for corruption into the holy nation.

Members of Christ's Body

This is why it's important that each Christian understand his or her place in the Body of Christ. By His Spirit God has gifted us to serve our fellow believers with words of edification and deeds of love (1 Cor. 12:7-11). If we are not actively seeking to nurture and use our gifts in ministry, beginning in our everyday lives and our local church, we may already be allowing a root of sin to grow in our souls. God has called us to become equipped for ministry and to serve others after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:11, 12; Jn. 13:1-15). If we refuse to do this and to take our place as contributing members of the Body of Christ, are we not disobeying the instruction of the Lord? Are we not betraying the people of God?

We never sin alone. The first step along the way of escape through temptation is to remember that we are linked by God's Spirit with all other believers in the world. Rebellion or corruption, introduced into our souls, will have deleterious effects on all the other believers with whom we are associated. Love of God and neighbors requires that, in the face of temptation, we look for the way of escape, beginning with the first step, which reminds us that our lives are linked with those of all the other followers of Jesus Christ.

Next steps: Talk with a pastor or church leader about this idea that we never sin alone. Would they agree with this? Have they seen examples of this? Does your church have a means in place to help each church member grow in the Lord?

26 Slippery Slope

But when I thought to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed, swept away utterly by terrors! Psalm 73:16-18

The Lord's discipline

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God does not sit idly by while His children stray into the paths of sin. He is our Father, and He loves us enough to bring discipline against us until we turn from our wicked ways and renew our journey along the path of righteousness (Heb. 12:3-11). And, the writer hastens to add, such discipline as the Lord brings against us is never pleasant.

As Asaph began to recognize the sin he was contemplating, and to turn from it, he found a way of escape by remembering that we never sin alone. The sins we indulge always affect others. At the same time, he remembered that God hates sin and is opposed to those who pursue it. Sin, Asaph reflected, is a slippery slope, leading to judgment. Once we have begun on a path of disobedience, it's easy to continue on that road, as we saw in the case of Peter. One sin leads to another, and the likelihood, for those whom God has called as His children, is that at some point in that slide, they're going to meet up with Him. And it won't be pretty.

The fear of God

We have seen in a previous series that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10). The fear of the Lord is also a pretty good deterrent to sinning. When we remember that sin is what sinners do, and God brings judgment against those who turn away from Him (Rom. 1:18ff), the fear of the Lord can provide a second step along the way of escape that can help us to *grow through* temptation unto maturity, rather than *fall through* it into sin.

In this matter of the judgment of God, Asaph had a front row seat in seeing how the Lord dealt with David. David decided to shirk his duty as a king and stay home during the season when kings go out to re-secure their borders and eject any foreigners who may have made incursion on the land (2 Sam. 11). Perhaps he considered that he was just too great a king for such routine stuff. Or perhaps he had other plans.

Exhibit 1

As it turned out, David spent the evenings gazing on his neighbor's wife, until he could no longer resist the temptation to have her. Bathsheba – no bastion of purity in this affair – was an easy take. What neither of them planned on was her becoming pregnant.

Not a problem, David thought, now deep into a web of sin and disobedience. He sent for Bathsheba's husband under a pretense of wanting a report on the war, and arranged for him to spend the night with his wife before returning. What he didn't count on was that Uriah was a nobler fellow than David expected, and he refused to enjoy the privileges of marital bliss while his comrades were risking their necks in battle.

On to plan B: David sends a message to Joab – a scab if ever there was one – by the hand of Uriah, instructing Joab to arrange for Uriah to be killed in battle. Whereupon, that being accomplished, he takes Bathsheba for his own wife. But the child she conceived dies shortly after birth, and from that point forward, David's family falls into disarray and dissolution. He very nearly loses his kingdom, and all his troubles trace back to a failure of temperance in the season when kings go out to battle.

All that was quite fresh in Asaph's mind as he turned away from temptation and the slippery slope of sin. The fear of the Lord can be a wonderful aid in finding the way of escape when temptation is calling us to disobey God. But now – not then – is the time to be nurturing that fear, so that, when we need it in the way of escape, it will be there to keep us off the slippery slope of sin.

Next steps: Have you experienced the slippery slope of sin in your own life? Talk with a friend about such an experience. How can Christians help to keep one another from entering this slippery slope?

For reflection

1. “One sin leads to another, and the likelihood, for those whom God has called as His children, is that at some point in that slide, they’re going to meet up with Him. And it won’t be pretty.” Can you think of some other examples in Scripture which demonstrate the idea that sin is a slippery slope? Or ways that God has disciplined His wayward children?

2. Make some notes here from your continued reading on the subject of self-control:

For prayer:

27 Flee to the Lord

Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Psalm 73:23, 24

The presence of the Lord

Now well on his way through the way of escape from temptation, Asaph takes the most crucial step of all. He has already remembered that any sin he commits will be a betrayal of the Lord's people. And he has remembered that sin is a slippery slope, along which, at some point, we can expect to meet up with the discipline of God. Now Asaph flees to the Lord, for he knows this to be the surest way to resist temptation and rediscover his proper footing.

I want us to observe three facets of Asaph's turn to the Lord. Each of them is important in helping us to practice the virtue of temperance. The first is recalling and resting in the presence of the Lord. Asaph recalls, "I am continually with you; you hold my right hand." Even if our sins never affected anyone else – though they always do – they would affect the Lord. Whenever we sin it is in the presence of the Lord. He has promised to be with us always, and that means He is with us as we set our feet on the path of rebellion, corruption, and sin. As if it weren't enough that our prior sins helped to put Jesus on the cross, now we're going to drive another nail into His torn hands and feet, and He is right there with us as we do.

I wonder how many of us have the sense of Jesus' presence with us such that we can envision Him holding our hand as we walk through our daily activities in life. Jesus is with us as we're facing temptations, and we can draw on His presence to help us resist whatever within us wants to rebel and disobey. But not only is Jesus with us where we are; according to the Apostle Paul, we are also with Him, where He is, seated at the right hand of God (Eph. 2:6). If we can envision ourselves facing this temptation within the throne room of God, from a place at the very right hand of the Father, it might prove to be a needed help along the path of resisting temptation and growing in the Lord.

Prayer

Second, Asaph turned to prayer. He is already engaged in prayer by verse 18, when he is talking with the Lord about the slippery slope of sin and how he does not want to come under the discipline of God. The rest of this psalm continues his prayer to the Lord. Having come to the recognition of the temptation he was considering, Asaph drew on the presence of the Lord and opened a conversation with Him. Prayer can be a strong source of spiritual energy for resisting temptation and growing in the Lord. The more we practice the discipline of prayer throughout the day, the greater will be the likelihood that prayer will be there to help us find the way of escape from sin when we need it.

The counsel of God

Finally, Asaph sought the counsel of the Lord. He looked to the Lord to guide him concerning how he ought to deal with this situation. At the very least Asaph must have recalled the tenth commandment, "You shall not covet." Perhaps his mind also ranged to reflect on those Scriptures which instruct believers to hate sin (Ps. 97:10), to fear the Lord and serve Him (Deut. 10:12), and to seek Him while He may be found (Ps. 32:6). Wherever his mind may have wandered, Asaph found guidance and strength by turning to the Word of God, a sure lamp unto our feet when the darkness is threatening all around (Ps. 119:105).

As we seek the way of escape through temptation, drawing near to God in prayer, resting in His presence, and reflecting on His Word can be a strong help in practicing the self-control we need to keep from falling into sin.

Next steps: Make a list of a few Scriptures you might turn to when faced with temptation. Write them down and carry them with you until you have them memorized. Use them faithfully to flee to the Lord when you are confronted with temptation.

28 Delight Yourself in the Lord

Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you...But as for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. Psalm 73:25, 28

Renewing temperance

Temperance is the virtue which enables us to postpone some immediate gratification for a more long-term benefit. In the case of temptation, temperance works to help us recognize and resist temptation, so that we *grow through* it unto greater maturity in the Lord, rather than *fall through* it into rebellion and sin. By practicing temperance we decline the short-term enjoyment of sin in order to preserve and enrich the long-term delight of living in the favor of the Lord. Temperance, or self-control, is one of the fruits of the Spirit which He works in all those who love the Lord Jesus sincerely.

Loving Jesus is the way to renew and strengthen the virtue of temperance – and all the other virtues as well. Asaph found the way of escape by remembering that we never sin alone, that sin is a slippery slope, and by fleeing to the Lord in prayer and meditation. At the end of his psalm, the sin of covetousness successfully avoided, he rests in his relationship with the Lord and is renewed and strengthened for whatever he may have to confront next. As he makes his way through the way of escape, Asaph is refocused on the Lord, and his soul is filled with the delight of contemplating His God and resting in Him.

Real joy

David had written that in the presence of the Lord are fullness of joy and pleasures forever more (Ps. 16:11). He also declared that if we delight in the Lord, the Lord will give us the desires of our heart (Ps. 37:4). Sin may be appealing, as it winks and beckons at us from the other side of temptation. But, as we have seen, sin separates us from the Lord, thus robbing us of the joy and pleasure we can know as we delight in Him. If, when temptation comes, we focus on the short-term “pleasure” of sin, we will lose sight of, and then contact with, the eternal and glorious pleasure of the presence of the Lord. But if, as temptations arise, we turn our minds to the Lord and contemplate His beauty and goodness, our delight in Him will light the way of escape through temptation to a deeper relationship with the Lord.

It’s clear that Asaph enjoyed a deeply personal experience of the Lord. He talked about the Lord as holding his hand, guiding him with counsel, present with him on earth, the strength of his heart, and the portion of his daily life. Asaph delighted in being near to the Lord and taking refuge in Him. It’s clear that Asaph’s faith was more than just a kind of intellectual assent. Asaph *knew* the Lord, and knowing Him, he delighted in God – he would not allow some short-term enticement to create any interruption in his fellowship with God. Is this the way you would describe your own relationship with Jesus Christ?

Delighting in the Lord

And this is where temperance is forged and strengthened – in the presence of the Lord, delighting in His beauty and goodness, resting in His presence and power, contemplating His good and perfect will. They who will not nurture this kind of relationship with the Lord are certain to be vulnerable to every temptation that crosses their paths. Unless we discipline our hearts to delight in the greater and eternal good of the presence and pleasure of the Lord, we will too easily be drawn aside to the cheap thrills of every passing temptation. If we delight in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our hearts – which, because we delight in Him, means He will give us more of Himself.

Practice temperance, and you will grow in your relationship with the Lord and your ability to know, enjoy, and glorify Him.

Next steps: Talk with some Christian friends about what it means to “delight in the Lord.” How do they practice this? How has delighting in the Lord been helpful to them in resisting temptation? What can you do to encourage one another to spend more time delighting in the Lord?

Additional Resources and Activities on Temperance (Self-control)

Order a copy of Calvin Miller's helpful study, [Self-Control: Cultivating Spirit-Given Character](#), from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you grow in the virtue of temperance:

Charles Colson, "[The Return of Restraint](#)"
Charles Colson, "[Temperance for Today](#)"
Mark Earley, "[Taming Tween Divas: Learning Temperance](#)"
Alan Jacobs, "[Computer Control? Who's in charge?](#)"
Peter Augustine Lawler, "[Restless Souls](#)"
T. M. Moore, "[Conscience and the Spirit](#)"
Greg Peters, "[On Envy and Temperance](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some actions you can take this week in the area of temperance:

1. What is your church doing to instill the virtue of temperance in its members? Ask a few of the leaders. Do they seem to understand what temperance is? What can they point to in the church's disciple-making effort to show they understand the importance of this virtue?
2. Pay attention to commercials on television for the next few days. Do they seem to encourage temperance? Do they think we should "stay within the lines"? Talk with some friends about your observations. Do they share your concern about the growing "free-spiritedness" of this age?
3. Email today's *Talking Points* column to several Christian friends. Challenge them to read some of the resources, watch the *Two-Minute Warning*, and take on one of the activities.

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some Christian friends: "The Scriptures teach that self-control is one of the fruit of the Spirit. What is self-control, why do we need it, and how can we nurture it in our lives and churches?"

Justice

Let Justice Roll Down

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

- Amos 5:24

This was perhaps the most familiar Scripture text many of an earlier generation of Americans. In the struggles for racial equality, against the war in Viet Nam, and for a myriad of other injustices, the first part of Amos 5:24 became a mantra for an entire generation: “Let justice roll down...”

But those who invoked this text in support of their cause actually, and perhaps unwittingly, derailed the original intent of Amos’ message and hijacked the idea of justice for the cause of a relativistic social agenda. The quest for “social justice” became the rallying-cry of politicians, activists, and movement leaders of all sorts, but the idea of “social justice” is a far cry from what Amos sought.

Justice, in Biblical terms, is equated to righteousness, as our text suggests. Righteousness describes the character of God and, in particular, of our Lord Jesus Christ. To plead for justice to inundate a society, therefore, is nothing more or less than to call upon the Lord to advance the rule of King Jesus in our midst – the propagation of the Gospel, making disciples, building churches, doing good, and glorifying God in every aspect of life.

It is a cry, in other words, for the realization of the Biblical worldview.

These days “justice” has become a political term used to invoke a sense of “fairness” toward whatever aggrieved person or group might be seeking redress. But with the banning of the Scriptures from the public square, justice, as God intends it, continues to elude us, and we as a society continue to drift from its sure moorings into a dangerous sea of relativism which can only sink us in due course.

“You keep on using that word,” Inigo Montoya explained to the Sicilian in *The Princess Bride*. “I’m not sure it means what you think it means.” Just so believers today need to confront our society’s misuse of the idea of justice, exposing the feeble foundations of judicial and political relativism and pragmatism, and calling the nation to consider once again the foundations of Biblical justice, which this nation’s Founders understood and embraced.

“Let justice roll down like water...” Indeed, we need a renewing of the Biblical idea of justice in our day. The nation continues to survive only because it still borrows on those Biblical foundations, without acknowledging its debt to the Word of God. Our calling is to praise and thank God for those sure foundations, to rediscover the wisdom and strength they encode, and, with courage and prudence, to press for a return to a Biblical view of justice, beginning in our own lives.

29 The Goal of Public Policy

“You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land the LORD your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 16:19, 20

A political football

At times it can seem as if public policy in America is little more than a political football to be kicked toward one goal or another, depending on which outcomes the electorate will cheer. In the American political arena today, public policy is often used as a tool of political power, rather than as a means to advance the common weal. But shouldn't “public policy” have the interests and wellbeing of the “public” as its primary focus? If public policy is to escape the grip of political power, it must have a focus and goal that transcend politics. And these must be agreed to by all who are concerned with the common weal.

So what is, or rather, what *should be* the goal of public policy? That is, what should they who have been entrusted with making public policy seek as its proper outcome?

We can find some help in thinking this question by turning to the ancient Scriptures of the Bible. Our text forbids making public policy the tool of “special interest” by warning against partiality and bribes. Public policies are not to be made because they favor one group over another, to the advantage or aggrandizement of policy-makers. Any public policy that is tainted by partiality, favoritism, or catering to special interests cannot expect the blessings of God.

Justice

The goal of public policy, according to the Law of God, is justice, not the satisfaction of various interest groups and their political puppets.

Easy enough to say. However, it's difficult to see how policy-makers in American government can keep from bending policies to special interests when (a) lobbyists take up so much time and demand so much of the attention of policy-makers, and (b) corporations and other moneyed interests play such a significant role in political campaign funding. These two institutions – the lobby and political campaign contributions – invite policy-making according to interests, if not outright bribes. Partiality is the order of the day in American politics.

Achieving justice

Can we achieve justice nonetheless? Yes, if we are willing to guard the policy-making process. Since justice is a function of the decisions of men, the best solution to overcoming the sinfulness which has become entrenched in the American public-policy system is to elect people to office who understand and embody the principles and practices of justice, and who can show a credible record of justice in all aspects of their lives.

At the same time, we must work for reforms in campaign financing and the work of lobbyists that can help to ensure that policy-makers are swayed neither by the interests of their supporters or their own interests, but by the requirements of justice, first and always.

Any practices that transgress the boundaries of justice and can be demonstrated to be motivated primarily by self- or special-interest should be regarded as perversions. They should be challenged in courts and corrected according to the terms and demands of justice – which may include the exercise of justice against those who have perverted the public-policy process.

But all this talk of justice only begs the question: What *is* justice?

30 The Nature of Justice

“You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous. Justice, and only justice, you shall follow, that you may live and inherit the land the LORD your God is giving you.” Deuteronomy 16:19, 20

A changeable idea?

We have said that public policy-making in America can only avoid the pitfalls and corruption of mere self-interest by focusing on justice as its overarching objective and goal. But what is justice? Is justice defined by social whims or the squeaky wheel of outspoken interest groups? Does justice have a fixed basis, or is it merely something to define and adjust as we see fit?

For many people today, justice is like fashion: You can change the meaning of justice to suit the temper of the times. But this is not the way the Bible teaches us to think about justice; nor is it the way our Founding Fathers regarded this important virtue. According to the Biblical worldview, justice takes the form of policies and practices which embody the character and purpose of God. A society is just when its laws and ways reflect the goodness, wisdom, compassion, and honor of God.

The source of justice

Our text relates justice to honesty, fairness, wisdom, and righteousness. Each of these qualities, in turn, has its origin in the character of God. It’s interesting to compare our text with another passage in Deuteronomy 10:17, 18. Here God describes Himself by saying, “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing.” See how the idea of justice flows from the character and work of God. God does not show partiality. He loves those who are in need of justice. God cannot lie and does not deceive; He is all wisdom and understanding and knowledge. And God is righteous in all His ways. In the Trinitarian relationship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, honesty, wisdom, righteousness, goodness, and love obtain at all times, and evidence a Being full of glory and abounding in blessings.

God intends people to live in a way that reflects His own character, imitates His own works, and redounds to His glory and honor. A society is just when it manages to do this.

But how can a just society, one which reflects the very being of God, be achieved? By obedience to God’s Law and attendance on all His counsel and ways. Our text begins with the command to appoint judges and officers in all the towns of Israel (v. 18). These men were responsible to see to it that the holy and righteous and good Law of God (Rom. 7:12) provided the policies and guided the practices by which their communities existed. These officers would sit in the gates of the city to consider how best to bring the requirements of justice to bear on particular situations or circumstances affecting the wellbeing of their community (cf. Ruth 4). By turning to the Law of God and thinking through situations according to the demands of love for God and neighbor-love, the judges and officers could expect to make just decisions and enact just policies for their community.

Justice and God’s Law

We cannot have just public policies as long as the Law of God is ignored or despised. Only people can introduce the Law of God into the public-policy arenas of our society. Each believer bears a responsibility for seeking to affect public policy. It’s part of what we owe to Caesar in a free society. And believers should encourage their political representatives to consider the holy and righteous and good Law of God, and should be ready to assist them by every means to make policies that are agreeable to the requirements of justice.

But what are the requirements of justice? What forms does justice take in the Law of God?

31 Obligatory Justice

“When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to collect his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you.” Deuteronomy 24:10, 11

A jewel of five facets

In Biblical terms, justice is just the character and works of God lived out within human communities. A just society is one that reflects in its public policies and personal practices the wisdom, beauty, goodness, truth, and love of God. We might think it strange to turn to the Law of God for insight into the practice of justice. However, the Founders of this country did not think so. Many of the law codes of the American colonies included excerpts from the Law of God, copied verbatim or paraphrased as needed. Our forebears understood that God’s Law points the way to justice. If we would understand justice, therefore, we need to look a little more closely at the Law of God.

Justice as encoded in the Law of God is a jewel of five facets. The first and most basic of these we may refer to as *obligatory* justice. In the exercise of obligatory justice we give to others the dignity, respect, and love they deserve by virtue of their being human beings and the image-bearers of God. Paul summarizes this sense of “obligatory justice” nicely when he writes, “Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law” (Rom. 12:8).

Respect and love

Our text gives an example. In ancient Israel, making a loan to someone did not give the one who made the loan the right to violate the privacy or impugn the honesty of the one who had received the loan. If the terms of the loan included a pledge, the one making the loan was expected to trust the good and honest intentions, as well as the word, of the one receiving the loan, and wait for him to bring the pledge out to him.

We owe a good many things to all our fellow human beings. Together, these make up the various obligations of neighbor-love. We owe them honesty, truth, and fairness in contracts, wages, and communications; respect and care for their persons and property; due process in civil matters; and the protections of justice at all times. We are our neighbors’ keepers, and whatever love requires of us, we must be ready to perform.

It is not the place of public policy to *require* neighbor-love. Much of what constitutes obligatory justice will be practiced only out of a sense of gratitude to God, obedience to His Law, and compassionate concern for our neighbors. However, when clear transgressions of obligatory justice are committed, it is the role of public policy to redress injustice.

Enforcing justice

How would a man be judged in ancient Israel who did, in fact, enter his neighbor’s home and search all through it to find the pledge his loan required, while his neighbor stood by, humiliated? It’s not clear. This and every breach of obligatory justice would have to come before the judges and officials of the community for a ruling. We would only be speculating as to how they might correct the injustice – the slight of a neighbor’s dignity – such an unlawful action would create.

But that they had the power to do so, as well as the responsibility, is certainly the case. And this is where other facets of the practice of justice come into play. For when *obligatory* justice is violated, restorative and retributive justice may be required.

But first let’s see if these might be avoided through the practice of *preventive* justice.

Next steps: Make a list of all the people you typically encounter each week – at home, at work or church, and throughout the community. What do you “owe” these people by way of obligatory justice? What does it mean for you to love these people with the

32 Preventive Justice

“If fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make restitution.” Exodus 22:6

Guarding against injustice

Justice, we have said, is a jewel with five facets – at least, according to the Biblical worldview. We are acting justly when we love our neighbors in the same way God loves them. Thus, the first facet of justice is what we may refer to as *obligatory* justice, and it is a kind of catch-all category for whatever love requires.

The second facet of the jewel of justice is *preventive* justice. Public policy should provide laws and statutes that can help to ensure that people will keep the interests and wellbeing of their neighbors in mind at all times. People cannot be permitted to undertake endeavors which may endanger their neighbors or their property without taking appropriate precautions. By keeping watch over a fire one has started one may ensure that only what *should* be burned *is* burned, thus *preventing* injustice from occurring against one’s neighbor.

The practice of preventive justice is exemplified in the Law of God in various ways, designed to suggest a variety of situations and circumstances. One must guard against his flocks or cattle grazing in a neighbor’s fields (Deut. 22:1-4). Open pits should be covered (Ex. 21:33, 34). Homes must be built to guard against injury to people (Deut. 22:8). Dangerous animals must be kept in (Ex. 21:35, 36). Inheritances are to be protected (Num. 27:8-11). And so forth. Even animals and the creation itself are protected by the Law from being treated unjustly by human beings (cf. Deut. 25:4; 22:6, 7).

Considering others

These various statutes serve primarily to remind people to consider the interests and wellbeing of their neighbor so as to *prevent* any injustice arising from negligence or indifference. As with obligatory justice, preventive justice is backed up by other forms of justice. These statutes and precepts are intended to guide people in loving their neighbors so that no *unintended harm* may come from any of their actions.

Preventive justice at work

In my community we are required by our neighborhood association to remove the snow from our sidewalks as soon as possible. This is to protect the safety and ensure the wellbeing of delivery persons and neighbors who may be out on a stroll. There is no penalty for not removing the snow. However, if we do not remove it, and someone is injured or can show that he has been unduly inconvenienced by our neglect, he may have grounds to collect damages from us. The neighborly thing to do is to keep the sidewalks clean in front of our homes and thus bear witness to all who may enter our neighborhood that here we love our neighbors as ourselves.

The community in which our neighborhood is located depends on seven wells for its water. In order to ensure that our water is as good as it can be, local statutes prohibit the use of certain kinds of fertilizers or other outdoor chemical treatments. During summer months, signs will appear in the community advising us that the town council has determined that “Voluntary Water Usage Restrictions” are in effect. The policy of our elected officials is to prevent neighbors from committing injustice against one another by failing to exercise appropriate regard for the water supply.

Such policies and statutes reflect the preventive justice facet of God’s Law, and are to be welcomed, not begrudged. They help us to see that the Law of God can and should inform our public policies and our personal practice when it comes to living out the requirements of justice.

Next steps: Review the Biblical examples of “preventive justice” cited in this article. How many of these have some parallel in the laws we follow today? Meditate on Romans 2:14, 15. People may cringe at the idea of obeying God’s Law, but can we – should we – avoid doing so? Why or why not? Share your observations and thoughts with a Christian friend.

33 Restorative Justice

“When one man’s ox butts another’s, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share. Or if it is known that the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not kept it in, he shall repay ox for ox, and the dead beast shall be his.” Exodus 21:35, 36

Practicing God’s Law

It might sound a little scary suggesting that the Law of God should be consulted when it comes to matters of justice. But, as we’ve seen, we do it all the time. We just don’t recognize that when we shovel our sidewalks, sign a contract for a loan, keep watch over burning leaves, walk our pets on a leash, and keep watch over our neighbor’s home while he’s on vacation that we’re simply acting out the requirements of love outlined in the Law of God. We are *obligated* to live justly toward our neighbors, and, in part, that requires that we take appropriate *preventive* steps to guard his wellbeing and property.

The statute cited in our text above reflects the third facet of the Biblical teaching on justice, which we may refer to as *restorative* justice. According to the Law of God, when *injustice* has occurred, whoever is responsible for it must take steps to set things right again.

Making things right

This statute shows how the practice of restorative justice was nuanced in order to encourage the practice of preventive justice. If the ox simply, without warning or provocation, killed a neighbor’s ox, the owner of the goring ox had to sell it and share the proceeds with the owner of the dead ox. Also, the two would share the dead ox, whether the proceeds of its sale or its meat.

However, if the goring ox was known to attack, and the owner did not keep it in, then a greater injustice would have been committed – requiring a greater act of restoration. In this case the owner of the goring ox comes away with only the dead ox, while the owner of the gored ox receives a new beast from the owner of the offending ox.

In ancient Israel, whenever someone was injured by the neglect or indifference of a neighbor, restoration was required in order to return justice to the community. Once restoration was made the injured party was satisfied and the guilty party was exonerated. Neighbors could quickly get on with being neighbors without grudges being built up against one another. No prison time was involved, and no revenge was needed. Restoration could include money paid to return an injured person to health or for lost opportunity costs (Ex. 21:18, 19), borrowed things that were broken or lost (Ex. 22:14, 15), or even lost items that one might find (Deut. 22:1-4).

Jesus agrees

As Jesus made clear in the episode involving Zacchaeus, these Old Testament provisions for restorative justice are to be considered still in effect (Lk. 19:1-10). Zacchaeus, convicted of his sin and now devoted to Jesus as “Lord” (v. 8), determined to make things right with his neighbors. But rather than abide by the mere *letter* of the Old Testament laws, Zacchaeus showed his true heart of repentance and love by going *beyond* the letter into the *spirit* of the Law (2 Cor. 3:4-6), in order to show proper love for the neighbors he had wronged. Jesus, upon hearing his confession and plan, commended his action and confirmed that he was, indeed, a child of Abraham. Justice, which Zacchaeus had violated, was about to be restored, and neighbor-love would once again obtain in the community.

Justice is so important because it reflects the character and presence of God within a community. Public policies should exist which promote the practice of restorative justice, according to the spirit and not merely the letter of the Law of God.

Next steps: See what you can find out about the practice of restorative justice in your community. How does your community work with offenders to restore justice to those they have wronged? Share what you discover with some Christian friends.

For reflection

1. “In ancient Israel, whenever someone was injured by the neglect or indifference of a neighbor, restoration was required in order to return justice to the community. Once restoration was made the injured party was satisfied and the guilty party was exonerated. Neighbors could quickly get on with being neighbors without grudges being built up against one another. No prison time was involved, and no revenge was needed.” Why does restorative justice simply “make sense”? For the offended? For the offender?

2. Notes from your additional reading on justice:

For prayer:

34 Retributive Justice

“For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, ‘This is it,’ the case of both parties shall come before God. The one whom God condemns shall pay double to his neighbor.” Exodus 22:9

Restoration plus

When the peace of justice is intentionally or maliciously violated, the fourth facet of justice – *retributive* justice – may be invoked. Under the practice of retributive justice, those who have deliberately disturbed the peace and brought injury or damage to their neighbors, in addition to being required to restore the balance of justice, may be punished in ways appropriate to the offense. The pain of punishment is directed toward the heart of the offender, to discourage any future such acts. At the same time, the practice of retributive justice was designed to deter other community members from unjust actions.

In ancient Israel retribution could take the form of payment in kind (two oxen returned for one stolen), or as money or other goods, or even bodily harm – beating, as well as the well-known practice of *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye”). In extreme cases, banishment from the altar and community of God and even capital punishment could be inflicted. Thus it is clear that one purpose of the use of retribution was to punish the offender, as well as to convict the hearts of the entire community and to remind everyone of the high value God places on justice.

Retribution in an age of grace

In this age of grace we no longer practice retribution in the same way they did in ancient Israel. These days imprisonment is considered more humane, and it provides the opportunity for rehabilitating the offender. There are studies, however, which indicate that some offenders, given the choice between physical retribution – that is, a beating – and going to prison, would prefer the former. Don’t look for a return to such practices any time soon, however.

And in the case of capital punishment, grace is evident in the complicated and lengthy system of appeals which is typically followed in a capital case. So retributive justice continues in our day, but it is tempered by the common grace of God which He extends through the community of humankind.

The role of public servants

It is important to notice one thing more about the text cited above. When a complaint of injustice was lodged, a case would be brought “before God.” No one was allowed to take justice – particularly retributive justice – into his own hands. What actually happened, as we see in Deuteronomy 1:16-18 and Ruth 4, was that the contending parties would come before the rulers of the city, assembled in the gates of the city, and argue their positions relative to the accusation. It would be up to the judges to hear the arguments and determine which man was in the right. The phrase, “before God,” is intended to remind us of the solemnity of such proceedings. These are not actions taken merely for the sake of human wellbeing; the honor, presence, and truth of God are at stake whenever injustice has occurred. God Himself must be vindicated, and He has entrusted this duty to public servants, that they might do what is right and good before Him (Rom. 13:1-4).

A healthy *polis*, one where justice and all its benefits obtain, will not shy away from the use of retribution when it is appropriate. It will do so in a humane manner and without cruelty. But it will not abandon this fourth facet of justice. Public policy should reflect a determination to “wield the sword” against all evil, so that people will fear to transgress the bounds of justice and train their hearts to do what is right and good.

Next steps: If imprisonment is a more humane form of retribution than lex talionis, and if it offers the opportunity for bringing the grace of God to the lives of offenders, should our churches be more involved in prison ministries? Is your church involved in reaching out to inmates with the Gospel of grace? Talk with some church leaders about this matter.

35 Distributive Justice

“For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’” Deuteronomy 15:1

With us always

The Bible does not teach a *preference* for the poor, as though merely being poor were some virtue in itself. Indeed, some may be poor because they are simply unwilling to work. The Apostle Paul explained that such people deserve the fruit of their lethargy and are not to be cared for by the community (2 Thess. 3:10). All who are able are expected to work, not just so that they can provide for themselves, but so that they may have wealth and possessions to share with those who are truly in need (Eph. 4:28). The New Testament, following the lead of the Law of God, teaches that consideration and care for the poor should be a part of the Kingdom agenda of the followers of Jesus Christ. And this introduces us to the final facet of the Biblical view of justice.

The final facet of the Biblical teaching on justice is what we may call *distributive* justice. In ancient Israel, it was the responsibility of a local community to distribute freely of its goods to those who were in need among them. Whether such people became poor through some unforeseeable exigency, or whether they were immigrants or disabled, justice required that they be provided for, according to their need, by the community in which they lived.

Relief with dignity

But this did not entail free handouts to any who wished them. The poor generally had to work for their keep, thus retaining a measure of dignity and keeping their work habits intact. The statutes requiring landowners not to harvest all their produce – to leave grain and dropped bundles of harvest, as well as grapes on the vine and olives in the tree – allowed the poor to have something to glean and thus, through honest labor, to provide for their needs. The land, after all, belonged to the Lord, as did all the harvest He provided.

A local obligation

The practice of caring for the poor was the responsibility, in the first instance, of families (Deut. 15:7, 8), who were expected to care for their own poor. At the next level, the communities in which poor people lived became involved. Distributive justice is thus, in the first instance, a responsibility of charitable, human initiative and local government.

Distributive justice extends to religious workers as well. Priests and Levites, who did not own property in ancient Israel, and whose working life was devoted not to creating material wealth but to nurturing spiritual health and wellbeing, did not have the time to provide for their own needs. This was the responsibility of the community served by such people, through their tithes and offerings. It is not hard to see how such benefit could be extended to other public servants in a wide range of occupations.

Distributive justice also worked to make sure that inheritances were kept intact and could be passed on to legitimate heirs without interference or loss. Wages were issued on the basis of distributive justice, as Jesus demonstrated in the parable of the workers (Matt. 20:1-16). Workers and employers were expected to reach agreement on compensation, worker by worker. And employers were expected to distribute those wages in a fair and timely manner.

The five facets of justice are all addressed in the Law of God, and it's not difficult to see how, working together, the commandments, statutes, precepts, and rules of God's Law can help us in our day to see our way through to sustaining a more just, peaceable, dignified, and productive society.

Next steps: How should local churches work together to help meet the needs of poor people in their communities? Talk with some of your fellow church members and some of your church's leaders. What is your church presently doing in this regard? What opportunities exist for working together with other churches? How might you help?

For reflection

1. "In ancient Israel, it was the responsibility of a local community to distribute freely of its goods to those who were in need among them. Whether such people became poor through some unforeseeable exigency, or whether they were immigrants or disabled, justice required that they be provided for, according to their need, by the community in which they lived." What are some ways that your local community practices distributive justice? Could this be improved in any ways?

2. Bring together all your notes from your reading on justice, to help you prepare for the coming discussion on this topic:

For prayer:

Additional Resources and Activities on Justice

Order a copy of Chuck Colson's [Justice that Restores](#), from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you begin letting justice roll down once again:

Charles Colson, "[Just Grant Justice](#)"

Charles Colson, "[Justice that is Redemptive](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[For Justice and Goodness](#)"

Marvin Olasky, "[Justice as Righteousness](#)"

Marvin Olasky, "[Justice, Righteousness, and Faith](#)"

Marvin Olasky, "[Social Justice vs. Righteous Justice](#)"

James V. Schall, S. J., "[Varieties of Justice](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some activities to help you in working for justice:

1. How well do your fellow church members understand the concept of justice? Ask a few of them to define justice and to provide some examples to back up their definition. Then ask them if this is a *Biblical* view of justice or a definition they have gained from some other source.
2. Talk to a pastor or church leader about the church's responsibility in teaching justice to its members. How is your church working to make it possible for justice to roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream?

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some unbelieving friends: "Do you think people are still concerned about justice the way they were a few decades ago? What do you think people mean by that term?"

Faith

Inside, Outside

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

- Hebrews 11:1 (my translation)

The writer of Hebrews stakes out the true nature of Christian faith. He explains that faith is an “inside, outside” proposition. Within, it bathes our soul in assurance; without, it convinces the world that whatever’s going on within us is true, genuine, and full.

All who truly believe in Jesus Christ may be fully assured in their heart, minds, and consciences that they belong to the Lord and will be with Him forever. He never fails nor forsakes those who know Him, and whom He knows. The peace, joy, contentment, delight, courage, and hope which come with the *inward assurance* of belonging to Jesus are what every human being seeks, but only Christians truly know (Eph. 2:12).

Moreover, that powerful inward assurance of salvation impels us to action for the Lord. The joy, peace, and boldness He inspires within us lead to obedience in all our words and deeds. Thus the truth and love of Christ come to expression *outwardly* before the people among whom we make our way in the world. Peter said that the hope *within* us should be visible in our *outward* demeanor. When people see this hope – the fruit of full faith – they will want to know how they can get in on some of that.

So we only know true faith, saving faith, *full* faith as we experience both the inward and outward dimensions of this glorious gift. Faith experienced only *within* may be just a false sentiment which wavers with changing circumstances. Faith expressed only *without* can become legalism and a way of trying to save ourselves by our works.

We need to learn the reality of faith *inside* and *outside* – assurance and evidence. Then we’ll experience the reality of the resurrected Christ living His life within us as He draws us ever closer to Himself and fits us more completely for the work He has given us to do.

As we grow in the virtues of the Christian faith, let us make sure that all our aspirations are grounded in full faith – assurance *and* evidence that we truly belong to the Lord.

36 The Two Facets of Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1

A faith to live?

In his classic, *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer identified a problem affecting post-World War II Christians, one that continues into our own generation. Tozer lamented the fact that, for too many believers, the life of faith was little more than an intellectual and subjective experience. The reality of Christ and His saving work was something to *confess* and, perhaps, to *experience*; however, it seemed to have little impact on the way Christians of his day *actually lived*.

For most of the Christians Tozer knew, the only *real* world was the world of sight and sound and touch. The world where Christ rules at the right hand of God was not *real* in the same way that the material world is *real*. He wrote, “Our trouble is that we have established bad thought habits. We habitually think of the visible world as real and doubt the reality of any other. We do not deny the existence of the spiritual world but we doubt that it is real in the accepted meaning of the word.” He continued, “If we would rise into that region of light and power plainly beckoning us through the Scriptures of truth, we must break the evil habit of ignoring the spiritual. We must shift our interest from the seen to the unseen.”

Assurance and evidence

Tozer’s understanding of the life of faith comports nicely with that of the writer of Hebrews. Perhaps a better way to translate our text would be like this: “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the *evidence* of things not seen.” *Evidence* is something we can see, something that can be presented and judged. True faith, therefore, consists both of an *inward assurance* of the truths we believe, and the *outward practice* of those convictions, so that the *evidence* of what we *confess* is on display in every aspect of our lives. Having provided this definition, the writer of Hebrews next presents a kind of “Hall of Fame” of the faithful (Hebrews 11), showing by the example of well-known saints of old how what we *believe* is only brought to fullness by *the way we live*.

There are, in other words, two facets of faith: the *content* of our faith – what we understand, believe, and confess – and the *practice* of our faith – the evidence of our beliefs as this emerges in every area of life. The writer’s definition of faith is consistent with what we read everywhere else in the Bible. True faith, *full* faith, faith that leads to salvation and eternal life, is not just a matter of intellectual consent and affective experience. Merely *saying* that we believe, or even *feeling strongly* that we are in the favor of God can offer no assurance that we are true followers of Christ. We must have *full faith* or we have *no faith at all*.

Known by our fruit

Jesus said, “By their fruit you shall know them” (Matt. 7:20). Anyone can say he believes in Jesus, is sure that his sins are forgiven, and that he is going to heaven when he dies. But true faith is not simply this assurance of the things we hope for. True faith comes to fruition in *evidence*, the evidence of a life wholly given over to the unseen Lord, a life dedicated to Him and devoted to the pursuit of His agenda, by His means, and for the sake of His outcomes and glory. The Apostle James says that if we profess to believe in God, that’s fine as a starting-point. But there needs to be evidence of the reality of that faith. Otherwise, faith in the Lord, having no evidence to demonstrate it, is simply dead and non-existent (Jms. 2:14-26).

The challenge to us as followers of Jesus Christ is to make sure that what we are practicing is full faith. Certainly we need a clear understanding of the Christian hope – the hope of glory and eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. That hope must be embraced, nurtured, enlarged, and expanded day by day, using all the means the Lord has provided for us. But that *assurance* of things hoped for, if it is real, will ultimately bring forth *evidence* that we are devoted to the unseen things of God and Christ, and that we are determined to bring the reality of the unseen realm to light in very concrete ways through our own words and deeds.

Next steps: Ask some of your Christian friends to explain the difference between assurance of faith and evidence of faith. How do they see these as going together?

For reflection

1. “*Evidence* is something we can see, something that can be presented and judged. True faith, therefore, consists both of an *inward assurance* of the truths we believe, and the *outward practice* of those convictions, so that the *evidence* of what we *confess* is on display in every aspect of our lives.” How would you explain to an unbeliever what it means to “believe in Jesus”?

2. Take the time to do some additional reading on faith from the resources at the end of this section. You will benefit, and so will those you’ll be in discussion with at the next session. Make some notes here:

For prayer:

37 Looking to Unseen Things

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Hebrews 12:22-24

Eyes in our hearts

A. W. Tozer explained that the beginning of full faith is in learning to look beyond the things we can see to that realm of unseen things, where Jesus rules at the right hand of God. The writer of Hebrews says that this, after all, is where we have come to, if, indeed, we have come to true saving faith. Because of our faith in Jesus, we are able to see beyond the veil that separates the material from the spiritual world (2 Cor. 3:12-18). We have “eyes” in our hearts, Paul insisted (Eph. 1:18), by which, through faith, we may see realities beyond the material world which we know to exist because we know the Lord Jesus Christ, and He dwells there. So real is this spiritual realm, and so vital to full faith, that the Apostle Paul instructs us to “set our minds” on unseen things and to let these be the defining landmarks and guideposts of our faith (Col. 3:1-3). In Hebrews 12:2 the writer uses a participle – “fixing your eyes” – to describe what should be the *characteristic orientation* of our every waking moment.

The unseen world

We will not know full faith in Christ, or the full and abundant life to which He has called us by grace through faith, as long as our spiritual life consists of merely *inward understandings and assurances*, apart from the *outward evidence* of true saving faith. The unseen world of Jesus Christ exalted at the Father’s right hand, angels celebrating and serving His every command, saints assembled before the throne of Christ, precious and magnificent promises, and a glorious City to Come – this is the world to which all have come who truly believe in Jesus Christ. This is our homeland and our destination. Our citizenship inheres in this realm. Our lives are formed and shaped by the standards of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit which emanate from the glory of God and Christ. And if we are living full faith, having the eyes of our hearts fixed on the world of unseen things, the *reality* of that world and all its beauty, goodness, and truth will begin to be *evident* in our daily lives.

Seeing the unseen

So what does this entail? How do we set our minds on this unseen realm and keep the eyes of our hearts focused there throughout the day? Let me suggest three critical components to a life fixed on unseen things.

First, we have to *understand the landscape of unseen things* – the true nature and composition of that realm to which we’ve come, especially the vision of Jesus exalted and reigning in glory. The writer of Hebrews sketches this in outline form in our text. Many other passages of Scripture – especially in the Psalms and Revelation – flesh out this landscape of unseen things. We must study and meditate and set these images, in particular the glory of God in the face of Jesus, as the backdrop for all our thinking and living (2 Cor. 4:6).

Second, in order to *carry this vista with us* throughout the day, we should schedule brief retreats for prayer and learn the songs of saints past and present which celebrate this glorious realm and our place in it. Ancient chants, great hymns of the past, Negro spirituals, and even many contemporary Christian songs can help, when coupled with intermittent prayer throughout the day, to keep us focused on our true provenance and citizenship; but we must take more seriously than we do at present the discipline of singing to the Lord and one another – what Paul describes as evidence of the filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-21).

Finally, seek opportunities to *talk with other believers* about the glories of this unseen realm – how it appears to you, how you experience and seek it, the ways that thinking on it lends strength to your daily walk with the Lord. We will not make progress in attaining full faith unless we first begin to set our minds on the things that are above.

38 Take Up the Struggle

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. Hebrews 12:3

No easy road

The Christian life is not a life of ease. It is, rather, a life of struggle and work. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ unto good works (Eph. 2:10); we must daily work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12); and we must not allow ourselves to grow weary or fainthearted in this high and holy calling. It is only through work and struggle that we are able to bring forth the *evidence* of what we are *assured of* in the words and deeds of a transformed life. The Christian life is like running a marathon race or fighting in a battle raging against us on all fronts. Any other way of living the Christian life is not the life of full faith.

There are two aspects to the Christian life which make this struggle particularly difficult. First is the reality of sin. Even though Christians have been redeemed and forgiven of their sins, still, we continue to sin. If we say that we do not sin, we are kidding ourselves and lying to God (1 Jn. 1:8). A law of sin, which dominated our lives before Christ, continues to operate within us, reminding us of old and sinful pleasures and seeking to distract us from the pursuit of holiness in the fear of God (Rom. 7:21-23; 2 Cor. 7:1).

Moreover, the sinful world in which we live strews our paths each day with temptations, inviting us to walk in the ways of the flesh rather than the ways of the Lord (Gal. 5:16-23). Further, spiritual forces of wickedness in high places assail us continuously and from every angle, seeking to distract us from our concentration on the things of Christ and to divert us from the path He calls us to walk (Eph. 6:10-20).

Be done with sin!

But we are called to be done with sin, to lay it aside, even to hate it (Ps. 97:10), and succeeding in this daily and ongoing challenge takes a great deal of concentration and energy. If we truly believe in the Lord and are seeking to orient our lives according to the righteousness and peace and joy in the Spirit of His unseen realm, we will daily discover areas of our lives – thoughts, affections, priorities, and practices – that are out of accord with the ways of our glorious King Jesus. We must check these at once, confessing, as the Spirit searches us (Ps. 139:23, 24), all that is contrary to the Lord and His will, and taking up instead whatever things are holy and good and true in their place (Rom. 12:21; Phil. 4:8).

An ongoing struggle

“Fightings and fears, within, without”: This struggle against sinful ways will never be finished in this life, so we need to be ready to engage it every single day. At the same time, we must learn to recognize the discipline of the Lord when He intervenes in our lives because, for whatever reason, our vigilance against sin has not been sufficient. The writer of Hebrews tells us to expect discipline from the Lord, and he warns us that such discipline is never pleasant (12:3-11). But God is determined to keep us on the path of righteousness, since this is where we can know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. He will use a wide range of disciplines – including loss, setback, ill health, persecution, shame, defeat, and more – to get us to see in our lives whatever He sees and is seeking to correct.

So let us prepare for struggle in this walk of faith. As we fix the eyes of our heart on Jesus, let us be vigilant to confess and repent of all sin and to recognize the discipline of the Lord, so that we may bear up under it with thanks, praise, and circumspection, until He brings us to the progress He desires for us in knowing the life of full faith.

Next steps: What's the difference between working for salvation and working out salvation? Ask a few of your Christian friends to comment.

For reflection

1. “The Christian life is not a life of ease. It is, rather, a life of struggle and work. We have been redeemed by Jesus Christ unto good works (Eph. 2:10); we must daily work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12); and we must not allow ourselves to grow weary or fainthearted in this high and holy calling. It is only through work and struggle that we are able to bring forth the *evidence* of what we are *assured of* in the words and deeds of a transformed life.” In what ways do you experience this “struggle” of faith?

2. Notes from your additional reading on faith:

For prayer:

39 Worship along the Way

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire. Hebrews 12:28, 29

First and foremost

The Christian life is, first, foremost, and at all times, a life of worship. The fact that, through Jesus Christ, the believer has been ushered into the very presence of God Himself should be sufficient to inculcate a mood of worship in all we do. As we give ourselves to meditating on the unseen realm, where Christ is seated next to the Father, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, served by myriads of angels and adored by departed saints, our sense of wonder, awe, adoration, and, yes, fear should be greatly enhanced, leading to more spontaneous and ongoing worship as part of the evidence of our true and lively, full faith.

In our day most believers treat worship as an activity in their week rather than a way of life. Worship is what we do together on Sunday morning and perhaps one or two other times during the week. Worship may factor into part of our daily devotional time – for those, that is, who practice such a discipline. But the idea that we are continuously in the presence of the Lord – with Him where He is, as it were – seems hardly to impress the contemporary Christian. Which of us can say with the psalmist, “I have set the Lord always before me” (Ps. 16:8)? If it were in fact the case that we had “set our minds” on unseen things and were continually “looking to Jesus” it would doubtless be true that our frame of mind, and even our daily practices, would reflect a more worship-full approach to life.

Worship as work

The words “worship” and “work” are frequently associated in Scripture. Worship is work, the most important of the “good works” for which we have been redeemed by the Lord (Eph. 2:10). In worship we refocus our lives on our true citizenship and destination; we draw near the Lord, exalted in glory, so that we might bask in His abundant beauty, goodness, and truth; we confess our sins, pour out our praises, bring offerings of thanks and song, and wait upon the Lord to search and shape us by His Word and Spirit. The “acceptable worship” God requires of us is not only “acceptable” on the Lord’s Day. It is acceptable, and expected, all along the way in our walk with Jesus, as the most important way we signal to the Lord and the watching world that we live in a realm of realities *unseen* as well as *seen*. Worship is the quintessential way of expressing full faith.

Worship throughout the day

The Scriptures suggest various ways we might begin to bring worship more consistently into our daily lives, all day long. First, as previously mentioned, we might follow the example of Biblical saints, as well as of saints throughout the ages of Church history, and establish set times to meet with God for meditation and prayer each day. By retreating for ten or fifteen minutes into the Lord – in meditation, by praying a psalm, or by offering up our next activity to the Lord in prayer – at various times during the day, we continuously reinforce the spiritual framework and draw on the spiritual resources of our lives.

In addition, learning and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs – what Paul described as evidence of the filling of the Spirit (Eph. 5:18-21) – can create a *continuo* of praise beneath and throughout the activities of our day.

Finally, making a point to speak with, encourage, and pray with other believers during the day can also keep us in a mode of worship and connect us with the unseen realities that define our lives.

Our God is a consuming fire, and He calls us to worship Him, not just as a token activity in our week, but as a way of life. Worship throughout the day, and an attitude that inclines to worship continually, even in the midst of every other activity, is sure evidence of full faith. But we must work hard at this, just as at every other facet of our walk with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next steps: Jot down one or two of the ideas suggested in this article for bringing worship more consistently into your daily life. Practice these for the next day or so, and then share your experience of doing so with a Christian friend.

For reflection

1. “As we give ourselves to meditating on the unseen realm, where Christ is seated next to the Father, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, served by myriads of angels and adored by departed saints, our sense of wonder, awe, adoration, and, yes, fear should be greatly enhanced, leading to more spontaneous and ongoing worship as part of the evidence of our true and lively, full faith.” How would you explain the idea of “worship” to a new believer? What is worship? Why does it matter? How should we do it?

2. Notes from your additional reading on faith:

For prayer:

40 Love One Another

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers...Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. Let marriage be held in honor among all...
Hebrews 13:1-4

All you need

Back in the 60s, when the Age of Aquarius was still trying to be born, pop singers pled with their audiences to help build a more loving world. “All you need is love,” the Beatles insisted. “What the world needs now is love, sweet love,” crooned Dionne Warwick. Of course, the world did not become a more loving place, all that schmaltzy music notwithstanding. Pop music today doesn’t sing much of a world of love; its focus is more individual, sensual, and debased. If we can’t have a world of love, then let’s just get whatever we can while we can. That seems to be the sentiment pervading much of contemporary life and culture.

But the world still knows that love is the answer. It just doesn’t have any answers for how to make love happen. Francis Schaeffer wrote that love is the quintessential mark of Christian faith (*The Mark of the Christian*), the evidence of full faith in full flower. He was right, of course. The writer of Hebrews therefore reminds us that we cannot rightly worship God without also loving our neighbors as ourselves. Full faith, faith that practices unseen realities, will issue in love – both for God, and for our neighbor.

Whom to love

Note the different people toward whom the believer is to direct his love. First, to fellow Christians: “Let brotherly love continue.” Some of us might want to ask, “When did it ever begin?” Do the people in your church seem genuinely to love one another? Do they even know one another? And what about the other churches in town? Does the love of Christ connect the congregations in your community in an ongoing effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3)? Probably not. But love toward our fellow believers is the starting point for a life of love. If we cannot love those who share our faith in Jesus, how will we ever find a way to love the last, the least, and lost among us?

Second, the writer urges love toward perfect strangers – the girl at the checkout counter, the clerk at the post office, the fellow in line behind you, new neighbors on your street. Hospitality is not just a discipline we practice in our home. Wherever we encounter strangers, they need to experience the sense of integrity, worth, and value that we acknowledge in them as image-bearers of God.

Next, we are to love the outcasts of society – prisoners and those who are mistreated in one way or another. This is a large category of people who deserve the love of the Christian community, including the poor, those who are abused or abandoned, believers persecuted for their faith in other countries, people who are taken advantage of by their employers or co-laborers – even those who rail against our faith in Jesus Christ. Justice and love require that we exercise the faith of Jesus in showing concern for and relieving the plight of those who suffer in various ways.

Finally, we need to practice love in our homes, beginning with our spouses. Here I’m sure we could all use a refresher course on showing the love of Christ to those closest to us. If we honor our marriages and the families that derive from them, we will work hard to make the love of Christ the foundational principle and constant atmosphere of our homes.

Make love your aim!

Love requires that we do good and share with others (v. 16), for this is pleasing to God and part of the evidence of full faith at work in our lives. Make love your aim, and aim it wherever you can.

Renewing Virtue

Next steps: Who are the people in your life who should most consistently experience the love of Jesus through you? On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the best rating, how are you doing? For each person, pick one way you might show the love of Jesus more consistently each time you see him or her. Then get going!

For reflection

1. “But the world still knows that love is the answer. It just doesn’t have any answers for how to make love happen.” Meditate on John 13:1-15. What would you say are the key components of love as we see them here?

2. Notes from your additional reading on faith:

For prayer:

41 Follow the Leaders

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.
Hebrews 13:17

The problem with authority

In our day “authority” has become a kind of four-letter word. Even those who serve in authoritative roles – police, public officials, credentialed professionals, parents – are looked askance at, especially, if they try to wield their authority without due regard for the presumed autonomy of those in their charge. Those in places of authority are routinely mocked, vilified, and opposed by people who don’t give a fig for their authority and think we all ought to have an equal voice in pretty much everything.

In the Church we’re particularly squeamish about authority, and one reason is because, in recent years, many who have been invested with authority in the churches – pastors, priests, evangelical leaders – have proven themselves unworthy of that trust. In most churches I suspect we prefer to think of “leaders” rather than “authorities.” Leaders have to earn the right to be followed, which, in our day, they typically do by being energetic, visionary, funny, and people-oriented. And even then, following a leader is strictly optional, if we think there’s some benefit in it for us. Church leaders have authority only as long and as far as the people are willing to extend it to them, and so they’re always running things up the flagpole to make sure folks are going to salute before they launch off in some new direction.

A leader we can follow or not; to an authority we must submit, even if only grudgingly. And submitting is not exactly high on our list of things to do.

Submit we must

But submit we must, at least in the Church. Submitting to proper authorities is an integral component of full faith. If we want to gain the benefit God intends for us from those appointed to lead, we’re going to have to learn to submit.

When we submit to another person we extend a high degree of trust to him, acknowledging our need of his insights, skills, and other endowments. In the military, soldiers submit to their platoon and squad leaders, because this is the best way to save their own lives. On an athletic team the players submit to the coach. In the Church believers are called to submit to their leaders because this is the best way to realize a healthy soul and full faith in Jesus Christ.

But with so many voices clamoring for our attention, urging us to follow them – frequently defined in terms of making donations to their work – how can we know who the real leaders are?

Tests for real leaders

Hebrews 13 suggests three tests for real leaders. First, they teach the Word of God faithfully (v. 7). They aren’t trying to impress anyone with how clever, witty, or visionary they are personally. Their desire is that the Word of Christ might dwell in people richly, and all their teaching is based on that holy and inspired Word.

Second, their lives exemplify the things they teach (v. 7). True leaders are people whom, as you follow them, you begin to become like in ways that reflect full faith in Jesus Christ.

Third, true leaders care for our souls (v. 17). They are interested in us, want to get to know us, do everything they can to serve and build us up, and will go the extra mile when necessary to help us become people of full faith in Jesus. Such people – teachers of God’s Word, examples of full faith living, and earnest shepherds – can be trusted, followed, and submitted to in the confidence that God will use them in our lives to help us to full-faith living as well.

Submitting to such leaders is yet another *evidence* that we have a faith that is not only *sure* of our hope, but is a living force in our everyday lives.

Next steps: Talk with some of the leaders at your church. Ask them what they understand by the idea of “submitting” to leaders. Ask them whether or not this is really important.

For reflection

1. “Submitting to proper authorities is an integral component of full faith. If we want to gain the benefit God intends for us from those appointed to lead, we’re going to have to learn to submit.” Why do you suppose churches need leaders to whom members can submit?

2. Notes from your additional reading on faith:

For prayer:

42 Do Not Be Led Away!

Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, which have not benefited those devoted to them. Hebrews 13:9

Difficult and demanding

Our survey of full and true Christian faith began with an exhortation to run our race with endurance (Heb. 12:1). The course of life is long and the course of Christian life is difficult and demanding. We can expect many distractions along the way – subtle voices telling us that concentrating on unseen things is folly, that if God really loved you He wouldn't make your life so difficult, that worship on Sunday is sufficient, that others should be loving and sharing with you rather than you taking all the initiative, that you don't need to submit to any church leaders, and that you don't need more teaching from the Word, or that you can decide for yourself just what the Christian life really ought to be. There will be no shortage of voices suggesting that this whole “full faith” enterprise isn't worth it, and that all you have to do anyway is just believe.

Such voices, however, are not those of the Word of God.

False teachers in every age

In every age there have been smart, clever, articulate, and persuasive false teachers who have led many believers into a compromised faith. They use all the language of Scripture and elevate the Name of Jesus, but their teaching departs from the truth of Scripture in subtle ways, and those who follow them never quite get around to knowing full and abundant life in Christ. The writer of Hebrews is as urgent about this as Paul and Peter and John: Do not allow yourself to come under the thrall of false teachers, no matter how appealing they may be, for you will not attain full faith in Christ sitting at their feet.

So how do we keep ourselves from being led astray by false teaching? By pursuing full faith in Christ day by day! The only way to keep from being led off the course of the race we have been appointed to run is to make sure that we are staying on that course, day-in and day-out. This means ongoing attention to both facets of full faith – making sure of the hope we have in Jesus Christ, and working to bring forth the evidence of that hope in every aspect of our lives.

A full-time calling

Living the Christian life is a full-time endeavor. The tendency among so many contemporary Christians is to live their lives in niches – work life here, family life here, avocations and diversions here, church and Christianity here, and so on. As many studies and polls have shown over the years, the vast majority of those who profess to be born-again followers of Jesus Christ lead lives which are barely distinguishable from their unbelieving contemporaries. They spend their money in the same way, watch as much television, participate in the same diversions, carry about as much debt, and divorce at about the same rate. This is because they're living their faith in a niche – the niche of church and Christian activities. This is where they do their “Christian thing.” The rest of their lives seem hardly affected by their profession of faith in the King of glory.

If this is how you live, then you will certainly be vulnerable to being pulled off the course of full and vibrant Christian faith. Our Lord Jesus has redeemed, not just the souls of those who believe in Him, but their whole lives. He has reconciled us, whole and part, back to God, and He is now in the business, by His Word and Spirit, of making all things new in our lives. Assured of eternal life because we have trusted in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation, we must now be about the business, as Paul puts it (Phil. 2:12), of working out – *out*, not *for* – our salvation day by day. We must strive to yield all our relationships, roles, responsibilities, possessions, and time to the Lord Jesus Christ. From these staging-grounds we may show the watching world the reality of full faith, evidenced in the undeniable power of transformed lives.

Live this way – live full faith! – and you will not be led astray.

Additional Resources and Activities on Faith

Order a copy of Chuck Colson's [The Faith](#), from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you better understand the nature of faith:

Charles Colson, "[Can Faith and Doubt Co-exist?](#)"

Chuck Edwards, "[Is Faith Blind?: The Role of Reason in Believing God](#)"

Gregory Koukl, "[Faith and Facts](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Little Faith](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Living by Courageous Faith](#)"

Fred Sanders, "[Fact, Faith, Feeling](#)" as Ancient Wisdom"

Fred Sanders, "[Faith and Works Got Married](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some activities to help you grow in faith:

1. Do your Christian friends understand the two facets of saving faith? Ask around. How do your friends define what it means to believe in Jesus? Share what you are learning about full faith, and see how they respond.
3. How does your church work to build up both aspects of full faith? Talk with some church leaders about this question. Ask them to show you what you can do to help your fellow church members grow in full faith.

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some believing friends: "What does it mean to believe in Jesus? Is faith just something we know and agree to 'believe'? Or is it more?"

Hope

Promises, Promises

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

- Proverbs 14:12

All human beings conduct their lives on the basis of promises. This is quite unlike animals, which exist on the basis of ingrained habits and instincts, and according to the demands of their immediate experience. Human beings live toward a future in which they place their hopes. They envision what they hope to achieve or realize, and this becomes the promise toward which they bend their energies. Of course, there is a certain amount of routine, habit, and mere reaction involved in this, but the phrase, “Hope springs eternal in the human breast,” truly applies to human beings.

It makes you wonder how people can continue to survive when their hopes are dashed. Think of all the broken marriages, lost jobs, eroded retirement plans, and failed dreams people experience. How do they keep on? They keep on by envisioning new hopes and dreams, and pressing toward new promises.

Which, as often as not, only fall through – like all the other hopes and promises they’ve ever pursued.

But they continue to seek new hopes, because the alternative to living toward hope is living in despair. Certainly a good many people today have settled into that grim scenario. But even these continue to slog it out day after day, in the hope, if only implicit, that, as Scarlet O’Hara exclaimed, “Tomorrow is another day.”

Another day, another disappointment – and another new hope. It’s a vicious cycle, and it’s getting more vicious all the time.

How different is the Christian hope than this! The Christian hope is grounded in eternal verities, unchanging and unfailing promises, and a work of redemption that assures us we can live in and for the glory of God. The Christian’s hope is not lodged in the vicissitudes and uncertainties of our fickle and changeable age. We have set our sights on a City to Come and a King Whose love can never fail.

This hope is grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – a Gospel none of us must fear to embrace and proclaim. The Gospel is Good News about a true and lasting hope that can bring change to our lives and times as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

All the vain hopes of our idolatrous age can only lead to disappointment and dismay. The Christian’s hope – the hope of glory in the Gospel of Jesus Christ – can never fail!

43 Not Ashamed

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... Romans 1:16

Same old story

I saw a bumper sticker the other day that speaks to the frustration many people are feeling over our present economic and political morass. It read, “So how’s that ‘hope’ and ‘change’ workin’ out for you?”

In increasing numbers, Americans are deciding to put their trust in the federal government to bring new hope and beneficial change into their lives. Only government, many believe, has the ability to marshal the resources needed to give every citizen a fair share in the nation’s wealth. We aren’t the first people to believe that heaven on earth is just a new Administration, a new Congress, or a new king away. History is littered with the detritus and damaged goods of governments which believed they could lead their nations to new heights of happiness and prosperity, only to strew the wake of their tenures with disappointment and discouragement.

When will we ever learn?

A power from beyond

The simple fact, as every believer will understand, is that finite, sinful people are neither smart enough, selfless enough, nor strong enough to overcome the downward pull of self-interest and self-preservation that characterizes all of us some of the time, many of us most of the time, and some of us all the time. We need a power from beyond ourselves that can re-energize our vision, revive our hearts, rebuild our consciences, and renew our strength so that we are able to lay hold on the precious and magnificent promises of God in ways that lead to real hope and meaningful change.

That power, as Paul understood, is only found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Only the Gospel can shake people free from the failed hopes, dashed dreams, and general disillusionment of their sinful past, and bring them into the favor of God. Only the Gospel can furnish people with the mind of Christ and a desire to serve His purposes, empower them to take up the challenges of His will, and engage them with His glory.

The power of the Gospel

The operative power of this Gospel is nothing that lies within the strength or will of human beings; rather, the Spirit of God and the righteousness of Jesus Christ – which the Gospel reveals and applies – bring to repentant and faithful men and women real hope and real change, the kind of hope and change that turns cultures, societies, and epochs upside-down for Jesus. For centuries people in every nation and culture have discovered the hope of the Gospel and have experienced Jesus Christ’s power to make all things new. They have known a true and abiding hope that produces lasting change in the way of goodness and truth, and they have faithfully transmitted that message of hope to the generations that followed them – all the way down to us.

All who enter into this Gospel by grace through faith encounter undeniable, transforming power that makes all things new in their lives and sets them on a mission of reconciling all things back to God.

No wonder Paul was not ashamed of this Gospel! We should not be ashamed of it, either. So great, so grand, and so glorious is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, that all who know it and conduct their lives according to its teaching are filled with the boldness of Paul to proclaim to every disappointed and discouraged soul the Good News: that there is power for the asking, power for real hope and real change.

Next steps: What do people today hope in to give meaning, purpose, and value to their lives? Ask some of your friends – believers and unbelievers. Ask them to explain how this “hope”- whatever it is – works in their lives each day, and whether they feel like they’re getting closer to realizing it each day.

44 To Know the Truth of God

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth...because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie... Romans 1:18, 25

Two camps

The Bible teaches that people fall into one of two camps. There are those who, by faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, have entered the Kingdom of God and bask in the light of His Truth. Hungry for the Word of God, they find through Jesus the Truth that sets them free and equips them for lives of good works of love for God and their neighbors. They hope to grow in the knowledge of God day by day and to live in and for His glory, now and forever. Consequently, the hope within them gives them a whole new outlook on the world, one that even their non-believing friends can observe (1 Pet. 3:15).

On the other hand, there are those who suppress the Truth (whether consciously or unconsciously) and prefer to believe the Lie of their own presumed autonomy. As a result, they live in the darkness of unbelief and sin. Because they resist the Truth of God, which He is revealing all around them, they are darkened in their understandings and ignorant of their real purpose in life. They cling to false hopes and seek only those changes that promise to improve their material wellbeing.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful, through the work of God's Spirit and the righteousness of Christ, to help those captive to the Lie to break free into the glorious Truth of eternal life. This is a Gospel of which we need not be ashamed. This is Good News about real hope and real change.

Our self-revealing God

God is working overtime to make Himself known to people. As Paul writes, "For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them" (v. 19). Everything in heaven and earth is declaring the existence and glory of God (Ps. 19:104). In the blindness of their sin and the foolishness of their presumed autonomy, many people simply will not open their minds and hearts to what God is revealing to them. Instead, they choose to do whatever seems right in their own eyes. Thus they look to any other explanation for the origin and nature of things and the character of truth, embracing evolution, relativism, pragmatism, and any number of equally futile notions as they suppress the Truth of God in lives of unrighteousness.

The only hope and change such people can embrace is that which slips away with shifting circumstances and unforeseen eventualities, or that leaves them asking at the end of their quest, "Is that all there is?"

But the salvation that comes through the righteousness of Jesus Christ liberates people to embrace the Truth of God, and through that Truth, to know the Lord in personal, intimate, transforming ways. This is not a condition to which people arrive because they're so clever or smart. The Gospel is power, real power, power to break through the darkness of sin, overcome the bondage of unbelief, and shatter the shackles of the Lie. By the power of the Gospel people may be born again to the real hope and real change that God grants them by His mercy and grace.

Real hope and change

The Gospel brings real hope and change because it is rooted in power from beyond this sinful world, power that can overcome our weaknesses, dissolve our fears, and make all things new in our lives. Here truly is a Gospel we can be proud of, a Gospel we must proclaim with as much joy and enthusiasm as we dare to live it, day by day.

Next steps: Suppose you were given an opportunity to explain the Gospel to an unbelieving friend – in three minutes! What would you say? Outline your thoughts, then share them with a Christian friend. Practice saying this outline until you know it by heart.

45 To Know the Mind of Christ

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking...And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. Romans 1:21, 28

So much for sound reason

Gullible. Mindless. Frivolous. Unbelievable. Outrageous. Dangerous. Idiotic. Useless.

These are just a few of the adjectives you are likely to hear from pundits or in casual conversations as people talk about the policies and practices of government, corporations, employers, the media, and even their closest friends. We don't think very highly of those in places of authority, and our view of even our closest friends is not all that commendable.

What's gone wrong with people's thinking these days? We can't seem to figure out or agree on what's best for the nation, who's telling the truth, how we ought to live, or even the meaning of our Constitution on any number of issues. If, as academics and philosophers insist, reason is such a prized possession and treasured tool, why is it that we find so many differences of opinion, so many wildly disparate strategies, and so many opposing views on how we ought to live? Why do people seem to be so *un*reasonable about so many different things?

The solution to sin

The answer is simple: sin and rebellion against the Truth of God. Sin clouds our thinking and befuddles our minds. Sin makes us think we're the center of the universe, and everyone who doesn't agree with us must just be crazy.

The solution to this condition is equally simple: The Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, for it is the power of God to save people from the folly of sinful thinking and to bring them into possession of the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16). The mind of Christ! Imagine! What a prized possession, to be able to observe the world with the mind of Christ, to understand every creature, situation, and opportunity from Jesus' Truth-bathed perspective, to think His thoughts after Him and nurture His worldview in our own minds! Here is something we can really hope in, because generations of those who have believed in Jesus have shown us the power of His mind at work in a wide range of disciplines and topics.

The Gospel and the mind

Simply put, the Gospel renews the minds of those who embrace it, leading them to think with the righteousness of Jesus Christ (Eph. 4:17-24). The Gospel offers every human being the opportunity for clear-headedness, honest thought, holy plans, and the ability to see all of life through the eyes of the risen and victorious Savior of the world. People who are still in their sins cannot help but depend on futile, debased thinking for the hope and change they desire. They cannot break out of their sinful patterns of thought, their truncated worldviews and selfish plans, on their own power. They need the power of Christ, the power of the Gospel, to blow out the cobwebs of wrong thinking and move in the furniture and accoutrements of the mind of Christ.

And Jesus can do this, is doing this, and will do it for all who embrace His righteousness as their key to a liberated life. Our calling is not to be ashamed of this Gospel, so that we draw back from opportunities to make it known, but to live out the mind of Christ in all its fullness, and to invite our neighbors and friends to consider this Good News as the only way to real hope and real change.

Next steps: What “reasons” can you give for why you believe the Gospel (1 Pet. 3:15)? Do you think these reasons might help an unbelieving friend to understand the Gospel better? Why not try sharing them with someone?

For reflection

1. “The Gospel offers every human being the opportunity for clear-headedness, honest thought, holy plans, and the ability to see all of life through the eyes of the risen and victorious Savior of the world.” How is the Gospel able to affect our thinking? How does such thinking affect our hope?

2. Notes from your additional reading on hope:

For prayer:

46 Beating with the Heart of God

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity...to dishonorable passions. Romans 1:24, 26

Corrupt at heart

That the hearts of people these days are fairly corrupt should not be hard to demonstrate. More and more people are committed to doing whatever seems right in their own eyes. But when their thinking is clouded by a corrupt heart, what they choose to do can be rather unseemly. Considering the crudity and baseness of what passes for contemporary entertainment, the sensuality and sexual imagery that suffuse advertising, fashion, and the Internet, and the shameless appeals to mere self-interest that characterize just about anything you can buy or might want to do, it's clear that our affections these have become seriously debased.

The culture which shapes the lives of many Americans is grounded in narcissism, devoted to material prosperity, and charged with entertainment and fun. Whatever impedes our ability to amuse ourselves to death, to use Neil Postman's memorable phrase, is to be avoided at all costs.

The hearts of people today are exposed to and infected with things dishonorable and impure, so that the hopes of many people have become corrupted by lust. With such hopes in the driver's seat of our souls, it's not hard to understand why the changes we continue to see in our culture and society are in directions contrary to the values and beliefs on which our nation was founded.

Sad to say, that doesn't seem to bother too many of us. But an impure heart will excuse impure thoughts, validate corrupt values, and lead to self-serving actions of the most shocking and shameful kind. Can anything deliver men and women from the tendency to give in to their basest affections and most selfish desires?

The Gospel and the heart

The Gospel can. The Gospel is the power of God to give people a new heart, as the Lord promised through Ezekiel (Ezek. 36:26, 27). The Gospel is true spiritual power, and when a person enters the orbit of the Gospel through faith in Jesus Christ, the power that raised Jesus from the dead begins to do a new work in their souls, beginning with their hearts. Now open to the Truth of God and thinking clearly about our sin and His righteousness, we begin to gain the mind of Christ concerning our sins as well. The Spirit of God within us works to plant the affections of God in our souls, and our hearts start to beat as one with the heart of God.

Gradually, the power of Christ's righteousness replaces our base and corrupt affections with true, pure, holy, and loving desires. We begin to hope for what Christ offers and to live toward the kind of change He promises. We recognize that God Himself is at work within us, willing and doing of His own good pleasure when it comes to the feelings we harbor, the aspirations we pursue, and the desires that motivate our every action. Just as the heart of Christ led Him to good works of loving service to others, so His heart, beating spiritually within our souls, changes the way we feel about others. Self-interest is replaced by care and compassion; fleshly desires give way to spiritual ones; fear, doubt, and jealousy yield the driver's seat of our relationships as compassion and love direct us on a new course.

All things new

The Gospel changes the heart and renews the affections, creating in us all new longings, aspirations, and hopes. This is not something people can do for themselves, as is obvious by the continuing downward moral drift of our society. If we're ever to have any hope of real change in our hearts, it will only be as the Gospel of Jesus Christ is able to exert more of its power there.

Next steps: To what kinds of inputs from the culture are you exposing your heart? Meditate on Philippians 4:8, 9. Evaluate your cultural life in the light of these verses. Where do you need to make some improvements? Share your thoughts about this with some Christian friends.

For reflection

1. “Now open to the Truth of God and thinking clearly about our sin and His righteousness, we begin to gain the mind of Christ concerning our sins as well. The Spirit of God within us works to plant the affections of God in our souls, and our hearts start to beat as one with the heart of God.” How do the heart and mind work together in the soul? How do they serve us in the hopes we pursue?

2. Notes from your additional reading on hope:

For prayer:

47 Saved from Foolish Choices

Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images... Romans 1:22, 23

Fools aplenty

The late Chris Farley used to have a comedy routine in which he interviewed guests as host of his own talk show. His guests were real celebrities, but his questions were always inane, irrelevant, frivolous, and often ridiculous. Inevitably, at some point in the interview Farley would ask a really stupid question, one that would put the guest on the spot. Then he would wince and smack himself on the head, and berate himself for his foolishness. “I’m so stupid!” he would painfully declare.

It’s the moment we all waited for, because we knew it was coming. He just couldn’t help himself: he was a fool, and sooner or later fools will do something really, really dumb. In Scriptural terms anyone is a fool who denies that God exists, that He created us, and that we will only know full and abundant life in a right relationship with Him (Ps. 14:1). The world, by that definition, is filled with fools – and this explains why so many people end up hoping in the wrong things and making so many bad decisions and choices.

The soul, as we have seen, consists of the mind and the heart. These days, neither of these seems to be functioning according to the Maker’s manual. When people hope in transient things, they’ll do whatever seems right in their own eyes – whatever they *think* makes sense or *feel* to be in their best interests. But these mostly leave them disappointed and looking for somewhere else to place their fading hopes.

The Gospel and the conscience

There is a third component to the soul. Operating in the navigator’s chair of the soul is the conscience. The conscience is the office of the will; it is the “final filter” that blends thinking and affections into action. The conscience holds and reads the maps of life. It guides the mind and heart through the many options facing us as we pursue our hopes and dreams. When people reject the knowledge of God they do not reject the need for values, priorities, and default choices. Instead, because they are not focused on God and His Word to guide them in tutoring their wills, they lean on created things: wealth, success, fun, fame, attention, power, and all the usual idols of our age in flight from God. Once a person establishes one or more of these as his ultimate objective in life, the tumblers in the conscience fall into lockstep with the demands of their chosen idol, and all their values and priorities line up accordingly.

From that point forward the conscience and will are trapped in a Chinese handcuffs of self-serving, foolish decisions and choices, and sooner or later, most people end up doing really dumb things. Strive and struggle though they may to make their wills bend in more wholesome directions, those who will not embrace the Gospel of Jesus will always fall for a lesser god, which is no god at all, and the whole, sad cycle of folly repeats itself anew. Hopes fade and must be reconstructed; changes disappoint, yet we insist on more; and the ability to do anything different eludes those who are trapped in the downward spiral of sin. If such people are to have any hope for better changes in their lives, they’ll need new priorities, values, and convictions. But they will not find these within the pragmatic, relativist, and materialist culture of our day.

To save us from our folly

They need a power from beyond this present age if their consciences are going to be renewed and their hopes truly revived. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God to save us from our foolish wills. Through the righteousness of Jesus Christ, God gives people real hope and power, so that real change can occur in what we value and what we will. A good conscience, together with the mind and heart of Christ, can effect real – and beautiful – change in even the most hopeless of lives.

Next steps: Meditate on Romans 2:14, 15. How does God intend His Law to function in “charting the course” by which our consciences should navigate? Share your thoughts with some Christian friends.

For reflection

1. “Operating in the navigator’s chair of the soul is the conscience. The conscience is the office of the will; it is the “final filter” that blends thinking and affections into action. The conscience holds and reads the maps of life. It guides the mind and heart through the many options facing us as we pursue our hopes and dreams.” How would you explain how the mind, the heart, and the conscience work together to formulate our hopes?

2. Notes from your additional reading on hope:

For prayer:

48 Filled with All Manner of Righteousness

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness... Romans 1:28, 29

Guilt and shame

I remember reading an article some years ago in *The Atlantic Monthly* about the growing problem of shame in our society. It seemed to the writer that, as a nation, we were becoming a people overwrought with shame. The writer was careful to distinguish between guilt and shame. Guilt comes because we do something wrong, something out of the ordinary for which we can make atonement. People have developed many ways to cope with guilt – such as lowering the bar of their moral standards and aspirations.

But shame sets in when, as we continue doing what we know we should not, we start to despise ourselves and consider that we really have no intrinsic value or worth as persons. No one who is worth anything would ever do or think the kinds of things I do. At this stage, some twenty years since I read that article, I'd say we've just about moved on beyond any sense of national shame. As a people we have become so accustomed to unrighteousness that we're no longer ashamed to discover wickedness even in our own lives. In fact, to us they aren't wicked at all; everything is just a matter of taste. We're just doing what seems right in our own eyes.

Suppressing the truth

When people suppress the Truth of God and choose the Lie of any of the modern forms of idolatry, they set their minds, hearts, and consciences on a course of increasing darkness, baseness, and selfishness. The corruption that captures their souls inevitably works its way into their daily practices. As Paul wrote of the society of his day, "They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness." We see it all around us. Some of it shocks and horrifies us – child abuse, wanton murder, schemes to deprive people of their life savings, and so forth.

But these only shock us for now; will they shock us in a few more years, or will we simply become so used to them that we'll greet them with the same indifference we do our own wicked works? The practice of all manner of unrighteousness has become commonplace today. People lie without compunction. They indulge all manner of sinful thoughts and practices in the privacy of their homes. They cheat on their taxes, cheat on their spouses, and dance with death by overindulging in alcohol and drugs. All the while they say to themselves, "Hey, everybody does it." But, in their heart of hearts, they know that isn't true, and I suspect that a great many of them, still stung with guilt and shame, wish they could find some way out of this death trap of unrighteousness to a life that is more honorable, wholesome, and good.

Something better

People are looking for a better hope than that of mere self-indulgence. The Gospel of Jesus Christ provides the power to realize a better hope and to bring about real change in the way people live. For the Gospel brings us into the life of Jesus Christ, the righteous one. It introduces us to His Kingdom of righteousness, peace, and joy. It fills us with the Spirit of righteousness and opens up the Word of righteousness to our minds and hearts, so that God is able to work within us to give us new hope and new power for change.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ, and only this Gospel, can fill us with all manner of righteousness, by bringing the Truth and glory of Christ to light in every area of our lives.

Next steps: Talk with some non-Christian friends or co-workers about the difference between guilt and shame. Do they experience either of these? How do their answers lead you to think about the hope which is guiding their lives? Look for an opportunity in any of these conversations to share your own understanding of the difference between hope and shame, and to offer your reasons for believing the Gospel.

For reflection

1. “As a people we have become so accustomed to unrighteousness that we’re no longer ashamed to discover wickedness even in our own lives. In fact, to us they aren’t wicked at all; everything is just a matter of taste. We’re just doing what seems right in our own eyes.” Do you agree with this? What does this do to the hopes people pursue?

2. Notes from your additional reading on hope:

For prayer:

49 Freedom from the Fear of Death

Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. Romans 1:32

The shadow of death

Here's the really creepy thing about the power of the Lie: those who are in its grasp really do know God, and they really have some sense of what He requires of them. They may not admit it – like alcoholics in denial, they know they'd have to change if they did – but, because they are made in the image of God and have the works of the Law written on their hearts (Rom. 2:14, 15), they know that the life they are living puts them at cross purposes with God. They know their self-indulgent hopes are mere folly, and that the changes they seek will never satisfy. They live with a deep-seated sense of guilt and shame, and the shadow of death stalks and haunts them all their lives (Heb. 2:15).

Again, don't expect an unbeliever to admit this; nevertheless, it is important for us to know that, according to the Word of God, it's true. And people are right to feel this way who live as they do, because the wrath of God that has begun to devolve upon now (v. 18) them will ultimately ruin them utterly on that great coming day.

The liberating power of the Gospel

It's no wonder people today live in the fear of death. We euphemize death, try everything we know to extend our lives, and try to rationalize away the thought that one day we will meet our Maker face to face. But the Gospel can free people from the fear of death, the shame of guilt, and the inability to live up even to their own highest ideals and hopes. For the Gospel is the power of God to save people from ignorance, confusion, self-centeredness, and base living, and to liberate them into a life of good works according to the Law of God (Eph. 2:8-10; Rom. 7:12). The Gospel replaces the faded glories of futile human hopes with the real hope of the eternal glory of God (Rom. 5:1, 2). And this hope can never disappoint those whose lives are changing as they realize it more and more each day.

The Gospel does this because it comes to us from the purity and perfection of Jesus Christ, Who reigns at the right hand of God. His righteousness erases our sins and grants us entry into the eternal presence of God. His Spirit and righteousness work transforming grace into our souls and bodies, making all things new and recreating us in His own image (2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Cor. 3:12-18). And His righteousness will be all we need on the day when we stand before God and have to give an accounting for the works we have done in the flesh.

The sufficiency of Jesus

All who know Jesus, who trust in Him, follow Him, and are growing to become like Him by His Word and Spirit, can be assured that His righteousness will suffice to cover all our failings and shortcomings on that great and final day. We don't talk much about the "day of judgment" these days. It seems so old fashioned and irrelevant to our hip times. But you can count on the fact that those who have not yet found their way into the Truth of the Gospel, and who are therefore not experiencing the transforming righteousness of Christ, think about the day of judgment and shudder at the prospect that it may actually be real. They may hope that no judgment awaits them beyond the grave, or that God will somehow change His mind and grant everybody free access to eternal bliss. But this is the vainest of all the hopes unbelievers hold in their hearts. Do not be deceived; God is not mocked. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. The only hope that can deliver us from the fear of death, and change us so that we actually triumph over death, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the power of His righteousness.

Next steps: Do you believe in the hope of the Gospel? Do you believe it is the only real hope for every human being? What is your plan for making this hope known to the people around you?

Additional Resources and Activities on Hope

Order a copy of [Life Essential: The Hope of the Gospel](#), from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you understand the importance of hope:

Charles Colson, "[Got Hope?](#)"

Fred Dreher, "[Lessons and Carols: Finding Hope in Difficult Times](#)"

Matthew Guerino, "[Shafts of Hope](#)"

Robert K. Johnston, "[Hope in Hard Times: Part 1](#)"

Robert K. Johnston, "[Hope in Hard Times: Part 2](#)"

Derek Thomas, "[Hope Springs Eternal](#)"

R. V. Young, "[Hope's Eternal Spring](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some activities to help you understand the role of hope in human life:

1. In what do your non-Christian friends hope? What promises keep them going? Talk with a few of your friends. Explain that you are doing some study in the area of hope, and you'd be interested in hearing them discuss the hope that keeps them going. Be patient: They may have difficulty sorting this out. Share what you learn with some of your Christian friends.
2. What can Christians do to encourage one another in the hope of glory? Meet with a few friends and put this question before them. What suggestions do they have? How would you expect this to help you have more confidence in your hope? Make plans to carry out what you discuss.

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some believing friends: "Since everybody lives by hope, and since so many people's hopes are dashed and failing; and since the Gospel is the Good News of real hope and change, why are we believers so reticent in talking about our faith?"

Love

All You Need

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

- 1 Corinthians 13:13

“All you need is love,” sang the Beatles back in the 60s, as previously mentioned. People really believed that then. And the reason they believed is because it’s true.

But the love the Beatles were singing about, and the love that has failed and frustrated so many in this generation, is not actually the love we need. We need the greatest love of all, God’s love – manifested in Christ and working out in our lives as love for God and our neighbors.

You can’t get such love by merely wishing and hoping and singing for it. Such love comes through faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to His example and Word.

But we can grow in love, which is the greatest of all Christian virtues. Love fortifies faith and fuels hope; love issues in courage, wisdom, self-control, and justice. No wonder love is the greatest virtue, and no wonder the Bible defines love in terms of God and Jesus Christ.

The world needs love as much today as ever, and the followers of Jesus Christ are the ambassadors of love to make known the Good News of Jesus to the world. By our lives and words we can demonstrate and proclaim the reality and power of the love of God, holding out thereby the hope that others can enter with us into the Lord’s Kingdom of love.

But we need to make sure we understand this virtue and how to express it, and that we are committed to growing in love for the glory of God and the betterment of our neighbors.

Make love your aim, and you cannot fail to meet the needs of those around you. Make love your aim, and you’ll find Jesus ready to meet, fill, empower, and enable you with this greatest of all Christian virtues.

50 Where is Your Treasure?

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Matthew 6:21

We are what we love

In a very real sense, we are what we love. Love is that affection which, more than any other, gathers together our most powerful feelings and focuses them on a single object. It doesn't matter what that object is. It could be something as mundane as material wealth, fame or esteem, or even the possession of power over others. Whatever we love the most will be that which our affections point to, strain toward, and eagerly desire to possess. This “treasure” will fill our minds day by day with visions, dreams, and carefully-laid plans for how we may acquire that for which we long. Love can obviously make us crazy – it can lead us to do strange and unpredictable things as we press, push, and lunge in the direction of what we love the most.

What we most love, therefore, tells us something about the condition of our hearts. If the best part of our spiritual and physical energies are invested in making a good living – if being materially well-off is the treasure we seek – then this will be evidence of a heart which believes it can only be satisfied by the enjoyment of things and the realization of every whim. Can such a heart profess meaningful love to another person? Even more important, can such a heart really love God?

Where your treasure is, your heart will be. What you love, you will long for, strive after, and pursue until you have as much of it as will bring contentment to your soul.

But that's just the problem with things, isn't it? They never really satisfy because they never pan out quite the way we'd hoped; and we seem never to be able to have enough of the thing we desire most. Think: Imelda Marcos and shoes, Wilt Chamberlain and women, or Bernie Madoff and other people's money.

The power of love

Love can drive people crazy. But it can also make us sane – not only sane, but filled with joy, nestled in peace, brimming with hope, and given to caring selflessly for others. What kind of love, we might ask, can do so much for our yearning hearts?

The love God commands of us when He instructs us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. Of the three great theological virtues – faith, hope, and love – love is certainly the greatest. Love gives rise to faith and hope. It nurtures and sustains them, causing them to grow stronger so that they feed the cardinal virtues – courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice – and brings them to ever-higher states of maturity. Grow in love and you will grow in faith and hope; grow in these, and all the virtues will come to fruition as they should.

When the treasure we seek is not the fleeting fame or fortune of this fickle world, but the unchanging and unfading glory of the living God, then our hearts will be tuned and strengthened as God intends, so that we might truly live in love. Know God, and love Him – this is our singular purpose in life. Loving God, we will surely love our neighbors as well. If we can discipline our hearts to love God purely, supremely, and consistently, all the other aspects of our lives will come together as they should.

Loving God

In Scripture the command to love God supremely takes a variety of forms: “Know the Lord.” “Seek the Lord.” “Seek His Kingdom.” “Follow Me.” These are just a few of the various ways that Scripture defines our quest for this most desirable treasure. Love is the greatest of the virtues. When we are loving God and loving our neighbor, we are living the virtuous life. And when love is our treasure – the true and selfless love which God commands – all the affections of our hearts will be lined up precisely as the Lord intends.

51 The Great Commandments

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." Matthew 22:37-40

For love

If you want to understand the Bible, you have to make love the aim of your quest. Jesus put it as plainly as possible: The Old Testament Law and the Prophets – whether Old or New – depend for their being understood on our having love as the treasure we're trying to increase. If you only read the Scriptures in order to gain information or perspective, or to increase your understanding of doctrine, then you're not reading them according to the purpose for which they were given. God gave the Scriptures to equip us for good works, works motivated by and expressive of love (2 Tim. 3:15-17). And everything about the Scriptures – every book, section, story, doctrine, or theme – is intended by God to promote the practice of love.

But what is love? We've said it is the great treasure in which our hearts and lives are to be invested, and that the whole of Scripture is given to encourage us in lives of love. The Apostle John said that God is love (1 Jn. 4:8). We may turn that around and say that love is God. To love, in other words, is to relate to other beings as God does. We know from our Lord Jesus that, in the divine Godhead, the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to one another in love, in such a way as that they share in glory together (Jn. 17:20-24). The Father loves the Son and so gives Him the world and a people for His own possession, whom He loves, saves, sanctifies, and brings into His glory with the Father. The Son loves the Father and so set aside, for a season, certain of His divine prerogatives in order to do the Father's bidding in destroying death and Satan and saving from the destructive power of sin a people for God's own possession. The Spirit loves the Father and the Son by being the motive power in making God's plan and the Son's work come to fruition. And the Father and Son love the Spirit by giving Him such a central role in accomplishing the New Covenant. But most of all the three Persons of the Godhead love one another by their continuous, open, free, and full communion with one another, in love.

Loving like God loves

If only we could learn to love like that! The Apostle Paul captured the essence of God's love when he wrote, "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Cor. 13:4-8). This love is what God is like. To treasure love is to treasure God. Seek Him, know Him, follow Him, and serve Him, and you will live in love.

God is love. It stands to reason, therefore, that His Word – the Bible – would be all about love, teaching those who read it how they may enter into the life of love with God and for His glory. As we read and study the Scriptures, therefore, we must let love be our aim. The Bible is able to instruct and fit us for every work of love, toward God and toward our neighbors. But learning such love must be the thing we treasure most, what we think about and yearn for as we come before the Lord in His Word and prayer.

The treasure of love

Make love your treasure as that treasure is embodied in God Himself. Then mine the many and varied spiritual veins of Scripture for the gold, silver, and precious gems of divine truth and love which they yield. As you read and study, make it your aim to improve love for God and for the people around you. If you do, you will find that the meaning of Scripture becomes clear, your heart rises to the challenge, your mind opens to the prospects, your conscience resonates positively with the conviction of love's value – and you will begin to be a more loving person in all your ways.

Renewing Virtue

Next steps: What are some ways you would like to grow in loving God and the people around you? What are your greatest needs in this area? Talk with some Christian friends about these questions. Agree to pray together for a period of time that you may all increase in love for God and your neighbor. Meet together from time to time to share your progress.

For reflection

1. “As we read and study the Scriptures, therefore, we must let love be our aim. The Bible is able to instruct and fit us for every work of love, toward God and toward our neighbors. But learning such love must be the thing we treasure most, what we think about and yearn for as we come before the Lord in His Word and prayer.” Suggest some ways to focus your reading and study of Scripture more on growing in love:

2. Notes from your additional reading on love:

For prayer:

52 How to Know When You Love God

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" John 21:15

Well, do you?

Peter was clearly unnerved by Jesus' question. He was still living in the shame of having denied the Lord and the mystery of having seen Him alive from the dead. Now Jesus pressed the point, focusing Peter on the question of where his true treasure lay. "Do you love Me?" He asked the fisherman three times.

What if God were to ask you that question? And what if, when you answered like Peter, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you", suppose God were to respond, "Well, *how* do I know?" How *do* we know when we are loving God? What does that look like? How should we prepare for it? How can we keep from missing opportunities to love God, so that both He and we know that our love is genuine and true? If we don't know what loving God involves, or how we should do it, how will this ever become the true treasure of our hearts?

Loving God

Here I want to suggest seven indicators that will say to us and God that we truly love Him. By growing, enjoying, and serving the Lord in each of these areas, we may reach increasing assurance that our love for God is genuine. I will simply mention these in fairly rapid succession.

First, we know that we love God when we love His presence. The psalmist tells us that in the presence of God we may know fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11). The Apostle Paul urges us to seek the presence and glory of God, for here is where we will most surely be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:12-18). We love God when we love His presence and resort there often.

We also love God when we love His Word – reading, meditating, studying in the Word, hiding it in our hearts and sharing it eagerly with others (Col. 3:16), saying with Jeremiah that His Word is the joy of our hearts (Jer. 15:16).

We love God when we love His salvation, and when we work hard to unpack that glorious gift to increasing fullness in our everyday lives (Phil. 2:12; Ps. 116:13).

When we love God's creation, which He loves (Jn. 3:16), we are also loving the Lord. By giving ourselves to the study and enjoyment of creation, and to cultivating and conserving it so as to bring out the glory of God to others, we are demonstrating true love for our Father, Who owns it all (Ps. 111:2; Ps. 115:16; Ps. 8:6; Deut. 22:6, 7; Hab. 2:14; Ps. 24:1).

We may also be seen to love God when we love His works – creation, providence, and redemption – and when we talk about these eagerly and often, boasting of the greatness of our God and of His love.

We love God as we look forward to His appearing in the last days to take us home to Himself in glory. All who love the Lord Jesus pray, "Maranatha!" – "Come, Lord," and bring us to Your eternal glory.

Finally, we love God when we love bringing His praises to others, and to the generations that will succeed us. As evidence of our love for God, we delight in raising our children unto the Lord, leading others to the Lord, doing the work of making disciples, and contributing to the building-up of the Body of Christ.

Growing in love for God

When you see these seven indicators at work in your life, and growing, you can have confidence that you are loving God as you should out of the treasury of your heart of love.

53 How to Know When You Love Others

“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:35

Love your neighbor

Love is the greatest of all the virtues. God commands us to love Him and our neighbors, and we have seen that loving God takes some fairly specific forms. We can be sure that we’re increasing in love for God when the various indicators of that love begin to be more in evidence in our lives.

But what about loving our neighbors? What does love “look like” as we extend it to the people around us – in our homes, neighborhoods, workplaces, communities, churches, and so forth? Just as there are indicators which can guide us into greater love for God, so there are indicators which will help us to know when we’re loving our neighbors as we should. Let me mention five. In each of these areas we may consider whether we really love our neighbors as we love ourselves, or whether we need help growing in some aspect of that “greatest of these” virtues.

Indicators of neighbor-love

First, we love our neighbors when, like Jesus, we *seek* them out to love them (cf. Lk. 19:1-10). Jesus did not wait for lost or hurting people to find their way to Him. He went looking for them. He learned the names of many of them, and used them freely. He took the initiative in making certain contacts, some of which He repeated many times during His earthly sojourn. Jesus started conversations with people and was doubtless a good listener. And He prayed often for others, seeking their wellbeing before the Father. We can know that we love our neighbors when, like Jesus, we go seeking them, in order to touch them with His love.

We also love our neighbors as ourselves when we make ourselves available to serve them in various ways (Jn. 13:1-15). Here we must learn to be alert to the needs of others, to sense when they’re hurting or in need of some assistance. As we get to know people better we’ll want to let them know we’re always available to help should they need anything. And if we lack skills to serve others, we will become equipped and will persevere in reaching out to them every way we can. Above all we will point them to Jesus by our lives and words, in the hope that they might find in Him all the precious and very great promises of God (2 Cor. 1:20).

Third, the various “one another” passages in the New Testament suggest that one expression of neighbor love involves our “shepherding” others in their walk with the Lord. By building strong relationships, living and sharing from our own walk with the Lord, giving up some of our time and interests to care for others, defending them against false teaching and temptations, and helping them to grow in the Lord’s salvation we fulfill the shepherding role that Jesus, our Good Shepherd, declared He had come to perform (cf. Jn. 10).

Fourth, we love our neighbors when we encourage and instruct them in the Word of God. After all, here is where they, too, can learn to love with the love of God. We want our neighbors to hear the Gospel, to become immersed in the study of Scripture, to be able to drink from the living waters of the well of God’s Word so that they are daily refreshed and renewed in Him.

Finally, we love others when we are being a good steward of our time, treasure, talents, and attention in helping them to know the love of Christ. By praying for people, planning the time we will have with them, staying alert to others while we’re with them, seeking the Kingdom of God no matter the context, and maintaining an active watch over our own souls, we may hope to increase in love for our neighbors and, thus, to enrich the treasury of our souls with the love of God.

Growing in love for our neighbors

Just as we can grow in love for the Lord, so we must also strive to grow in love for our neighbors. Love is an active virtue. As Jesus came amongst us to seek and love us, so we must go among the people around us, determined to help them know the love of God which surpasses knowledge.

54 Word and Deed

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our hearts before him. 1 John 3:18, 19

More than a feeling

By now it should be clear that “love” is not just something we *feel*. We don’t love God or our neighbors just because we *feel* love for them, or *sincerely believe* that we love them. It’s easy enough to talk about loving God and our neighbors, even if we’re talking only with ourselves. But the Apostle John, echoing all the other apostles and the Lord Jesus, explains that real love is grounded in truth and comes to expression in our lives in meaningful, loving deeds. Love, we might say, walks the talk. Love fulfills the commandments of God toward Him and toward our neighbors (1 Jn. 5:1-3).

If we need a general guideline for the shape our expressions of love should take, we can do no better than that which Jesus declared in the Golden Rule: Do unto others whatever you would have them do unto you (Matt. 7:12). Now precisely because this Rule is so familiar, we need to take a bit of a more careful look at its teaching.

The Golden Rule

First, note that the emphasis is on *doing*. Doing involves us in bodily activities, whether of speech or deed, in the direction of or on behalf of others. This “doing” does not require heroic deeds on our parts. Jesus did good to people in the everyday context of His life, taking whatever needs He happened to encounter along the way as situations to be addressed with the love of God. By cultivating kindness, thoughtfulness, and a willing spirit, we will always be in a posture of readiness to *do* whatever is needed to show the love of God to our neighbors.

Notice, in the second place, that the grounding of the Golden Rule is in our own souls. We should do to others what we would like them to do to us. My father-in-law, Dr. Lane Adams, used to have the practice, from time to time – especially when he was a little down or feeling sorry for himself – of making a list of the five things he would most like people to do for him. Then he would get busy and start doing those things for others. This is good advice. As you are with the Lord in prayer at the beginning of the day, ask yourself, “What would I like someone to do for me today?” Whatever things the Lord puts on your heart, make a point of doing that for others, as often as the Lord gives you opportunity.

Finally, let’s be careful to observe what the Golden Rule does *not* teach. The Rule does not say, do unto others *as* they do unto you, but *as you would have them* do unto you. It’s easy to become upset with people who are inconsiderate, unfriendly, or downright mean toward us. Something in our old sinful nature says, “Well, if that’s the way you want to be, two can play at this game.” We must resist such mean-spirited responses whenever we feel ourselves falling into them. Jesus loved His enemies even to the point of dying on the cross for their – *our* – sins. If God did to us what we do to God, none of us would have any hope. So let us deny our sinful inclinations and follow instead the example of Him Who gave us this simple standard for our everyday practice of loving others.

The Golden Rule and loving God

By the way, the Golden Rule works as well in showing love for the Lord, albeit with something of a twist. The more attentive we are to the ways God actually loves us each day – and they are more than we can count – the more we will be inclined to reciprocate that love in worship, praise, obedience, and witness. We do unto the Lord *as* He does unto us, or, as the Apostle John put it, we love because He first loved us (1 Jn. 4:7-19).

Love is an active virtue, expressed in words and deeds of truth, whether these be directed toward God or toward our neighbor. May the Lord help us to grow in this greatest of all the virtues.

55 Growing in Love

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. 2 Peter 3:18

The greatest virtue

Love is the greatest of all Christian virtues. Love focuses faith and fuels hope, giving rise to lives of courage, wisdom, temperance, and justice. Those who are able to increase in love for God and neighbor express the life of Christian virtue as the natural outworking of God's Spirit and Christ's righteousness in their souls.

But we do not come to the life of faith full grown in the virtue of love. Instead, like all the virtues, we must grow in love. Growing in love is related to growing in the Lord Jesus Christ, for He is God, and God is love. The more we grow in Him, the more His love will come to expression through us. We cannot love others as we would have them love us simply because we want to. We need the power of the indwelling Christ to make us willing and able to love others according to the pleasure and purposes of God (Phil. 2:12, 13).

Growing from within and without

Growing in Christian love is a twofold proposition. On the one hand, we must concentrate on growing *from within*. We must train our minds to love, nurture love in our hearts, and settle our consciences on love being the highest virtue by which we must live. As we are thus being transformed on the *inside*, the *outside* of our lives will increasingly reflect that inward reality, and love will be more consistently the standard that guides our conduct in life.

But we can only effect real and lasting change on the *inside* of our lives by making some important changes in our *outer* lives at the same time. For example, inner change comes only by the work of God's Spirit, as we resort to the Lord in prayer and the reading and study of Scripture. But such disciplines take time, and it may be that the time of our lives is already spoken for by a variety of activities. But if the discipline that changes us *within* is as important as we suspect, we will need to recover some of the time of our lives in order to devote more of it to the disciplines of prayer, reading, meditation, and study of God's Word. We will have to change some *outward aspect* of our lives, setting aside some activities – such as sleeping, watching television, surfing the Internet, or whatever – in order to put the time those activities require to better use in nurturing love within our souls.

Similarly, as we are learning to bring our minds, hearts, and consciences into agreement about the real nature of love, we may discover some not-so-loving practices in our lives that will need to change. For example, I may learn (hopefully) that heartfelt, attentive, participative worship is a most important way of showing God that I love Him. At the same time, I may come to realize that my own worship is self-interested, uninformed, uninspired, and not very participative. I may need to change my approach to worship by, let's say, learning to sing the hymns more sincerely, or paying more attention during the preaching, or making sure that I understand the Lord's Supper and how I should practice it. As I make these *outward* changes in my approach to worship, I will discover that they reinforce what I'm learning in my soul, which, in turn, will make my worship of God a more loving and meaningful experience.

Looking to God's Word

We grow in love by looking to the Word of God to teach us what love requires – how we ought to think; what affections are appropriate, and toward which objects; what our values and priorities should be; and how we may practice love in every situation. Then, as we bring our words and deeds into conformity with the new furnishings of our souls, we will find that love becomes more consistently present in all our dealings with God and our neighbor.

But we need to make sure our love is patterned and practiced according to the only standard that pleases God. And that means looking to Jesus to guide us in the everyday practice of this greatest of Christian virtues.

Renewing Virtue

Next steps: How could you adjust your practice of spiritual disciplines to focus them more pointedly on growing in love? Make some plans, then share these with some Christian friends. Invite them to join you in this project of growing in love.

For reflection

1. “But we do not come to the life of faith full grown in the virtue of love. Instead, like all the virtues, we must grow in love.” How would you explain to a new believer why it is so important to grow in love?

2. Notes from your additional reading on love:

For prayer:

56 The Horizons of Love

“For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you...By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:15, 35

The focal point of Christian virtue

All the virtues Christians hope to acquire come together in Jesus Christ. This is why the Gospel is so important for renewing virtue in our day. Only the Gospel has the power to extricate us from the snares of sin and self-interest and to deliver us into the Kingdom of God’s own dear Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is all courage and wisdom; all self-control and all justice; Jesus is the very epitome of faith, hope, and love. The Spirit of God, working with the Word of God from within and without, intends to transform us increasingly into the very image of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 3:12-18). If we hope to renew virtue in our lives, then we will have to look to Jesus, especially for help in learning to love.

Love in action

The account of Jesus washing His disciples’ feet in the upper room provides the perfect setting for learning to love as Jesus loved. Here we find Jesus focused on two horizons and taking up actions in line with both those horizons. By staying focused Jesus was able to overcome any potential distractions and fulfill the requirements of love – both love according to the need of the moment and the people around Him, and love in line with the eternal purposes of God. Let’s consider these two “horizons of love” and how focusing consistently on them can help us to love as Jesus loved, and to grow in all the virtues of the Christian life.

The horizons against which love acts are two. The first is the *eternal* horizon, that toward which everything is tending – all of life and the entire cosmos, all of history, and every human being. John tells us that Jesus had this horizon in mind as He entered that upper room with His disciples. He knew that He was about to return to His Father in heaven (vv. 1, 3), but that He would only do so by fulfilling His own painful and sacrificial calling (his “hour”, v. 1). The eternal horizon is the horizon of God’s redemptive plan, what God is doing to reconcile the world to Himself through Jesus Christ. This horizon is fraught with hope and promises; but the path to it wends through self-denial, sacrifice, and suffering. If we would gain the eternal horizon, as Jesus did, we must be prepared to walk the path He has pioneered for us (1 Jn. 2:1-6). This eternal horizon demands that we set aside mere self-interest, concentrate on what pleases God, hope in His glory and strength, and proceed according to the love Jesus showed His disciples.

The second horizon against which love acts is that of the here-and-now. His mind filled with the prospects of glory through suffering, Jesus looked around at His immediate context to consider what love required. He was attentive to the opportunity presented by the situation before Him – someone needed to wash the disciples’ feet. This hardly seems like a grand work of redemption or theological significance. But it was the need of the moment, and no one was stepping up to take responsibility for it.

Jesus humbled Himself by removing His outer garment. Then He gathered the tools and resources needed for this act of love and, bending Himself before His disciples, He took the dirt of the streets in His hand, gently caressing and cleaning each man’s feet, to the undoubted astonishment of them all. Finally rising from this task, He gave a quiz: “Do you understand what I have done to you?” (v. 13) But He didn’t wait for them to answer: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example...” (vv. 14, 15).

Keeping focused for love

By focusing continuously on the eternal horizon of God’s redemptive plan, and by keeping alert to whatever rises before us on the immediate horizon of our everyday experience, we can learn to love like Jesus. And, loving like Jesus, we may expect to see all the virtues of Christ being renewed within us day by day.

Additional Resources and Activities on Love

Order a copy of Chuck Colson's book, [Loving God](#), from our online store.

Here are some resources to help you grow in the love of Christ:

Charles Colson, "[Truth and Love](#)"

Matthew Guerino, "[Indiscriminate Love](#)"

Peter Kreeft, "[Love](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[Everything in Love](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[How Do They Love Like That?](#)"

T. M. Moore, "[The Obligation of Love](#)"

Regis Nicoll, "[True Love](#)"

Next steps:

Here are some activities that can help you encourage others in the love of Christ:

1. Get together with some Christian friends. Tell them you've been doing some reading about Christian love. Ask them to talk about why love is so important. What opportunities for everyday acts of love are they presented with every day? Talk about how you can help one another become more consistent in showing the love of Christ to people around you.
2. Talk with some church leaders about the great commandment to love God. How is your church working to equip the members for this highest calling and obligation? What specific activities does the church sponsor which are designed to help people grow in love for God? See if there is anything you can do to help in this matter.

A conversation starter

Here's a conversation starter you can try out with some believing friends: "Loving God is the first and greatest commandment. How do we know when we're loving God as we should?"