

Paddle Hard

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going. Ecclesiastes 9:10

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve. Colossians 3:23-24

The scene was a beach in Ocean City, New Jersey. It was early morning before the lifeguards arrived at the shoreline and all the beach rules came into effect. Some of our family had come early in the day to use my brother Bob's two kayaks and a couple of paddle boards. The surf was a little rough that morning. Bob would get his adventurer into a life vest, be sure he or she had the paddle attached to the wrist with a Velcro bracelet connected to a thin cord, and give a few necessary instructions. Then he would hold the kayak in shallow water perpendicular to the waves coming in, let the kayaker hop in, and give it a mighty shove oceanward. "Now paddle hard!" he would roar over the waves.

That morning the surf was not easy to get through. The first three tries resulted in failure for some of our paddlers. Caught by the waves broad-side and rolled over in the crashing water, my niece, a veteran kayaker, refused to give up. Pointed out to sea again, "Paddle hard!"—and she made it! Kylie is not one to give up easily.

Picture the Lord as the kindly brother who gives you all the equipment you need to succeed in your life with Him. Your salvation is your life vest. The Holy Spirit carries you. The Word of God securely connected to your life gives you direction and power. But still the waves come at you, some unseen, some from an angle you would never expect, some much higher and fiercer than you could ever imagine. What do you do? As Bob shouted: "**Paddle hard!**" Your part is to be out in the waves, exerting all your strength and skill. The joy is in the journey, it's said. So paddle hard!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 13:17-15:18
 Matthew 21:23-46
 Psalm 26:1-12
 Proverbs 6:16-19

Monday, February 3

Fight Becoming Old and Cynical

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. 2 Timothy 4:6-8

Have you noticed how many old folks are grumpy and cynical? They say things like, "All young people are lazy and unwilling to work." Or, even at a wedding ceremony, "They may be happy now, but they don't have a clue what lies ahead." Or they say things like, "All politicians are power hungry and greedy. You can't trust any of them." Were they always so unhappy and cynical? Were they grumpy when they were kids? I don't think most of them were. The children I meet are generally optimistic and cheerful.

Life has a way of wearing us down with the injustices, broken trust, abuse, abandonment, and the mean things we all do to one another. Even we Christians can become grumpy old men or grumpy old women! Is that your destiny?

What is the secret to finishing your course with joy like Paul did? Practice thankfulness! Thankfulness for the good gifts, as well as for the trials, is an expression of faith in God. Thankfulness shows you are experiencing His unfailing love, and that you trust He causes all things to work together for good. Fix your hope on Jesus and His return to guard your heart amidst the pain and suffering. Paul trusted God's word and not his circumstances. If you do the same, you too will finish your course with joy in the presence of Christ!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 17:8-19:15
 Matthew 22:34-23:12
 Psalm 27:7-14
 Proverbs 6:27-35

Sabbath for Relationships

Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy. Exodus 20:8 NRSV

Many of us have listened to and read the books of Peter Scazzero. One of Peter's main topics is the importance of the Sabbath rest growing our love for God. I have been practicing this discipline more "religiously" most of the year with incredible results, so I highly encourage it.

But I want to focus on the impact the Sabbath rest might have on the other of the two greatest commandments: love others. The Sabbath can be a special time to grow in our love for others.

This applies to married and single people. I know a young adult group of mostly singles who spends almost all day Sunday together in really beautiful fellowship. The bonds they share are something special to behold.

But today I want to talk about families dedicating a whole 24-hour period to worshiping God and loving each other. What might our families look like if we turned off the internet Sunday morning and didn't turn it back on again until Monday morning? If Sunday afternoon lunch or dinner was a three-hour affair because there was nothing else to do except catch up and enjoy each other's company. Of course, the meal should be prepared the night before to limit the work required on the Sabbath. You could read out loud, play games, or take a walk.

I was recently trying to figure out how to sit still for 24 hours straight, and my daughter-in-law's parents were in town. I had literally nothing else to do, so I just sat there for hours learning about her dad's life in the military. It was fascinating, and our relationship grew exponentially from the experience.

We have lost the art of just sitting and listening to nature, to each other, to God. Maybe we are missing the Sabbath God intended. Give it a try and see what happens in your relationships.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 15:19-17:7
 Matthew 22:1-33
 Psalm 27:1-6
 Proverbs 6:20-26

Tuesday, February 4

The Good Life

This is what I have observed is good and proper; that it is appropriate for a man to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart. Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

God's way of life! God's way of living! Am I living it? The good life! What does that mean, what does that look like? Simply, it's to live my life unto God. He has a prescribed plan to do life that can only result in a rewarding and fulfilling life of purpose.

Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, identifies these three truths for a vibrant life.

First, embrace working hard in all you do. God worked six days and rested. Working hard is a reflection of who He is. After that God rested—that's why we celebrate Sabbath rest—to take one day a week and be intentional to reflect on God's grace and goodness. By so doing our soul and spirit are renewed unto Him.

Second, embrace God's plan of stewardship. Simply honor *the what and the how* of how God says we should handle our money, our time, and our possessions. It's all His! Amazingly, in Deuteronomy 8:17-18, God says even our talents and abilities that make us money are a gift from Him: "Otherwise, you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth.' But you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who is giving you power to make wealth, that He may confirm His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day."

Tomorrow I'll give you a "Gladness of Heart" test, and we'll see how well you do!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 19:16-21:21
 Matthew 23:13-39
 Psalm 28:1-9
 Proverbs 7:1-5

The Good Life – 2

This is what I have observed is good and proper; that it is appropriate for a man to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in his toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given him—for this is his lot. Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

Ecclesiastes 5:18-20

Here is how to measure your *gladness of heart* quotient. This is the third truth offered by Solomon for a vibrant life. How much gladness of heart are you (or am I) experiencing?

A few good questions to ask:

- How much enthusiasm radiates from my life?
- How much contentment do I possess?
- How much satisfaction do I live with?
- How thankful and grateful am I?
- How often do the words *thank you* flow from my lips?
- How much peace do I possess?
- How happy am I?
- How much joy and wonder do I live with?
- How fast is time going by for me?
- How often do I forget what day it is?

Time flies when you're having fun and living well.

These are just a few measures of *gladness of heart* that will be found in our lives when we live life God's way.

There are many avenues and venues to seek gladness of heart. However, there is but one that is truly lasting—in this life and in the next—a life in Christ.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 21:22-23:13
 Matthew 24:1-28
 Psalm 29:1-11
 Proverbs 7:6-23

Small, But Not Insignificant

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 ESV

A hero for me is a person who, regardless of gender, race, or social background, has the courage to change the course of his or her world. But when you think about changing the world, it becomes a little bit overwhelming! There are 7.8 billion people, and 3.15 billion people have not heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Years ago I was walking in an Asian city with a mass population of 16-18 million people. I'm on my way with some friends, walking on the sidewalk, just packed with people going by. I didn't see one foreigner the entire time that I was there. And I don't speak the language all that well, so I'm having a little private conversation with the Lord as we're walking to our training spot.

I just felt overwhelmed! I saw all this mass of humanity walking before me, and I felt broken because most of the people have not heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I'm thinking, "Lord, I am just so small." And I felt the Lord speaking to me in His inaudible voice. And He said, "Yes, Doug, you are small"—and He held the pause—"but you're not insignificant."

When you hear the Holy Spirit speaking to you, you'll walk away thinking. You may be overwhelmed, and you may feel really small. And you are small, but not insignificant. You're not insignificant in the Kingdom of God. You have a special place: God has created good works for you to fulfill in Christ Jesus.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 23:14-25:40
 Matthew 24:29-51
 Psalm 30:1-12
 Proverbs 7:24-27

First Distraction: Empty Deception

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. Colossians 2:8

In Colossians 2, Paul talks about three different distractions we face as Christians. Colossians 2:8 describes the first distraction: the world's empty philosophies. We are inundated with what the world thinks through movies, media, school, and many other sources, including advertising. It is so easy to buy into the world's philosophies. But beware! They are indeed empty deceptions.

How many of Satan's lies are openly accepted and embraced—many times even by Christians? Things like immorality, evolution, homosexuality, abortion, cheating, pornography These are all paths of life that are promoted, accepted, and embraced by the world around us. But they are hollow and empty. These paths entice and offer false promises of freedom. However, as you continue down the world's paths, you find that there is deception, pain, emptiness. These paths lead to destruction.

Our God offers truth and life: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form, and in Him you have been made complete, and He is the head over all rule and authority" (Colossians 2:9-10). Also verse 3 of Colossians 2 says, "in . . . [Him] are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." The further down the path you travel with God, the fuller you become. Fuller of wisdom, fuller of love, fuller of God.

Don't be deceived by Satan and the world. All our treasure is found in Christ. Anything else is empty and hollow deception. Set your eyes on Jesus today.

Tomorrow we will look at a second distraction described in Colossians.

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One-Year Bible Reading

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 Matthew 25:1-30
 Psalm 31:1-8
 Proverbs 8:1-11

Second Distraction: Spiritual Selfishness

Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. Colossians 2:18-19

Yesterday we looked at Paul's warning in his letter to the church at Colossae about the world's empty philosophies. Today we hear a warning about a second distraction. This distraction is spiritual selfishness, or our religious emotions. In his devotional, *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers says, "Spiritual selfishness always wants repeated moments on the mount. We feel we could talk like angels and live like angels, if only we could stay on the mount. The times of exaltation are exceptional, they have their meaning in our life with God, but we must beware lest our spiritual selfishness wants to make them the only time" (October 1st in *My Utmost for His Highest*).

It is wonderful to get excited about God—He has blessed us with emotions. But we cannot live on our emotions. It is easy to get so caught up in our feelings that we forget about God. We live for the next emotional high; we are spiritually selfish. If we feel good, we don't care if we are growing. But we may have lost connection with the Head, with Jesus. Yes, enjoy the spiritual high, but don't lose connection with Jesus. It is Jesus we need to live for, not our feelings.

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Exodus 28:1-43
 Matthew 25:31-26:13
 Psalm 31:9-18
 Proverbs 8:12-13

Third Distraction: Rules

If you have died with Christ to the elementary principles of the world, why, as if you were living in the world, do you submit yourself to decrees, such as, "Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!" (which all refer to things destined to perish with use)—in accordance with the commandments and teachings of men? These are matters which have, to be sure, the appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body but are of no value against fleshly indulgence. Colossians 2:20-23

Paul warns of a third distraction found in the above passage. Do we perceive that well-intended but non-biblical rules can influence our lives? These rules sometimes intrude into what should be the Holy Spirit's domain.

Sometimes it is our own rules that we make up: rules that demand that you read your Bible this way, or do church that way, or worship God this way. These guidelines often have value, but are they more important to you than Scripture? Are you judging others because they do it differently?

The world has religious impulses as well. Some of the world's "religious" rules are recycling, eating certain types of food, and exercising. Again, these routines have value. But are they more important to you than your relationship with God? Which do you think about more? Which do you spend more time on? Scripture or the world's rules?

Jesus said, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far away from Me. But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matthew 15:8-9).

God doesn't want us to live according to our own legalism or the world's rules. He wants us to live according to His Word, influenced by the love, joy, and peace of the Holy Spirit. His rules set us free. His rules will last.

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Exodus 29:1-30:10
Matthew 26:14-46
Psalm 31:19-24
Proverbs 8:14-26

Tuesday, February 11

Innocent versus Righteous

But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness. Romans 4:5

Justification: "Just as if I never sinned."

It sounds like a good definition—easy to remember and a certain ring to the words. But it fails to capture the true meaning of the word. "Just as if I never sinned" would indicate I'm now innocent—my slate is clean. I get a fresh start with God. But with this understanding, what happens should I ever sin in the future? Would I need to get justified all over again so my slate would once again be wiped clean?

Fortunately, that's not what *justification* means. As today's verse indicates, rather than simply being innocent, justification means that God credits me to be **righteous**.

What's the difference between being "innocent" and being "righteous"? Imagine a two-column ledger with your deeds on one side and Jesus' deeds on the other. Your side includes a multitude of sins, some of which you didn't even realize you'd committed. Jesus' column has no sins, only righteousness to the Nth degree. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, God took your sins and put them in Jesus' column. But He then took Jesus' righteousness and put it in your column!! We call this "The Great Exchange." We exchange our sin for Jesus' righteousness! (See 2 Corinthians 5:21).

Wow! What amazing love that Jesus would do that for us—for you and for me. I hope you grasp what He did for you, and it gives you a heart overflowing with gratitude!

Note the additional benefits of justification through Jesus: It gives us peace with God (Romans 5:1). It enables us to resist the accusations of men and of devils (Romans 8:33-34). An amazing gift, an amazing love!

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Matthew 26:69-27:14
Psalm 33:1-11
Proverbs 8:33-36

No Distractions

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. Colossians 3: 1,2 NIV

In Colossians 2, Paul talks about three distractions which can cause us to take our eyes off Jesus. These distractions are the world's philosophies, spiritual selfishness, and religious and worldly rules.

Colossians 3 shows us the remedy to rules: "Set your hearts on things above." Your emotions and feelings need to be centered on Jesus. "Set your minds on things above"—your thoughts need to be centered on Jesus. Don't let your beliefs be tainted by the world; keep them grounded in God. Paul is reminding us to keep our eyes on Jesus. Stop being distracted by the world or by mere religion. It is Jesus who matters. Everything else must pale in comparison: "While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

Who are you living for? Do your priorities reflect God's eternal perspective? Thankfully, the gentle wisdom of the Holy Spirit draws us to repentance and fellowship: "For you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3: 3-4 NIV).

Live for Jesus. He is so worth it!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 30:11-31:18
Matthew 26:47-68
Psalm 32:1-11
Proverbs 8:27-32

Wednesday, February 12

Worship—Loving God

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe. Hebrews 12:28 NIV

Kiss the son. Psalm 2:12a NIV

One of the original words for worship comes from two words that mean "to kiss" and "towards." The idea is that of a King's subject coming close to him to give him a kiss on the cheek out of respect and reverence and love.

We are to draw near to God with an attitude of reverence. As we draw near to the Lord we do so in a spirit of awe and wonder. For He is holy. We are to draw near to God with an attitude of respect or submission. He is sovereign. He is Lord. Our worship needs to express a wholehearted estimation that He alone is worthy.

We are also to draw near to God with an attitude of love. To kiss the Lord. This implies the expression of our affection for Him. We are to worship Him, not only with our intellect, but with our emotions—holy emotions. The Scripture teaches us to shout for joy and be glad, to tremble before His Word, to praise, to dance before Him, and also to be silent. People who are moved by God emotionally are aware of the presence of God and their utter need for Him.

I have found that when I am focused on loving my wife and drawing near to kiss her, I am not able nor am I tempted to kiss anyone else. In the same way, when we truly worship the Lord we will not be tempted to draw near to the world and kiss the things of this world.

May our kisses be only for Him.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 34:1-35:9
Matthew 27:15-31
Psalm 33:12-22
Proverbs 9:1-6

God's Lunchbox Note

The secret [or, intimacy] of the Lord is for those who fear him Psalm 25:14

It all started through a washing mishap with a sudsy crockpot. A slip from my hands and the rim of the crock was broken beyond repair. Thinking I might be able to save a few bucks, I stopped by the local Salvation Army store the next day to see if there might be a cheap replacement for my retired pot. Sure enough, I found not one but two crockpots to choose from! Thank you, Lord!

In the process of perusing the shelves for crockpots, my eyes landed on something else: a computer printer. At first it didn't register, and then the thought came, "Buy it for *Edge*!"

Edge is short for *Edge Venture*, a Christian men's retreat that my husband regularly staffs twice a year. Since the first Iowa Edge to the present, Dave has hauled our personal printer to the weekend event. Much as I have been happy to share, it has caused some inconvenience on my end, and I will also admit, a slight concern of our well-used printer returning home broken!

Now I was looking over a printer priced right: \$11 to be exact! Was it worth the gamble? God's nudge told me "Yes!" Purchasing the crockpot *and* the printer, I headed home. To my delight (and Dave's) I found that the printer worked perfectly and, in addition, even had a decent supply of ink.

A printer was not on my list that day, but it was on God's! He knew the need and my "secret" desire for an Edge printer, certainly not a necessity, but a special treat from God. A friend of mine would call this "God's lunch-box note" . . . just a little reminder that He's thinking about me!

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Exodus 35:10-36:38

Matthew 27:32-66

Psalm 34:1-10

Proverbs 9:7-8

The Forever Love

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, concerning those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, in the same way, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For we say this to you by a word from the Lord: We who are still alive at the Lord's coming will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the archangel's voice, and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are still alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

I've had a bittersweet love song in my head for a while now. Its chorus goes: "It's knowing that this can't go on forever, Likely one of us will have to spend some days alone. Maybe we'll get forty years together, But one day I'll be gone, Or one day you'll be gone."

I've seen the video where the writer, Jason Isbell, and his wife sing it, looking at one another and loving each other for as long as they can.

It's beautiful and sad.

But it brings to mind a deep truth.

"Encourage one another with these words." We do not grieve like those with no hope. We have hope. We have a hope that lives. We know that this life is not the end.

It's pretty obvious to me that we'll be able to love each other in heaven for eternity with our God. It seems that marriage relationships will change, but we'll still be able to love.

So, even though it's Valentine's Day, love can seem so temporary. Even a 40-year love can go by in a flash. But we have the hope and expectation that love will go on and on. Our God is love, and He has made eternity for us to be with Him.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 37:1-38:31

Matthew 28:1-20

Psalm 34:11-22

Proverbs 9:9-10

Saturday, February 15

An Amazing Truth

But now you have come to know God or rather to be known by God

Galatians 4:9

It is an awesome thing to know God. But it is even more amazing that God knows me!

Because of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we have come to know the incomprehensible love of God (Ephesians 3:18-19), and we have been invited to approach the One Who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Timothy 6:16).

Incredible as all this is, it is the second half of the Galatians verse that gets my attention: "God knows me." He knows me in the most intimate and personal way.

He knows me as my Creator. He knew all about me before I was a twinkle in my parents' eyes. He also understands that I am only dust (Psalm 103:14). As dust, who am I that I should be known personally by the Maker of heaven and earth?

He also knows me as my Redeemer. For He gave Himself for my sin (Galatians 1:4). As Redeemer He knows all my weaknesses, my faults and my sins (past, present and future), and yet He hasn't turned His back on me.

He knows me as the King. What an incredible honor it is for the Lord and King of the universe to publicly say that He knows me.

He knows me as the Great Shepherd. He understands my many needs. And He is able to meet all those needs because He is my Shepherd.

What a wonder of all wonders it is that God knows everything about me! He knows me infinitely better than I know myself. And despite all my shortcomings, this truth stands forever—God knows *and* loves me.

And you!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Exodus 39:1-40:38

Mark 1:1-28

Psalm 35:1-16

Proverbs 9:11-12

Reckless Love

Come, let us return to the Lord. For He has torn us, but He will heal us; He has wounded us, but He will bandage us. Hosea 6:1

Hosea and Gomer—not one of the pairs of names you put together as famous couples. Yet maybe it should be because they were God's example of His love for Israel and for us today. Like Gomer, Israel was unfaithful, whoring with other gods. But time and again Hosea brought Gomer back home into his loving arms, only for her to leave. Loving her through it all, even paying a ransom, Hosea never gave up on Gomer. So too, Israel, time and again followed other gods, playing the harlot, thumbing their noses at God. Yet God didn't give up. God sent prophet after prophet, begging them to return, but they didn't.

Hosea, the broken love story of Hosea and Gomer, reminds me of the song "Reckless Love." It's the picture of God with Israel and man. He fights for and won't give us up, even after we thumb our noses at Him. He loves us so much He had His only Son killed—to compensate for our sins. We are Gomer, playing the harlot with the world. God is Hosea, not giving up, but taking us back again and again. The overwhelming, reckless love of Christ.

What does this have to do with us? Everything! Hosea is a picture of God's love for us. God is waiting for you, no matter what you've done. We so easily turn away, get distracted, play the harlot. With loving arms and a grieving heart, God calls us to return to Him. Please, turn to Him today.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 1:1-3:17

Mark 1:29-2:12

Psalm 35:17-28

Proverbs 9:13-18

Sunday, February 16

Regarding Lawn Mowers and Gender Roles

Know that the Lord, he is God! It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. . . . For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 100:3-5 ESV

Recently at church we talked about Biblical gender roles in marriage. When we approach this topic, our attitude can tend to be negative or backwards. We should think that God is God, God made us, and He is good—just like it says in Psalm 100. In other words, specifically related to gender roles, what does my good God (who loves me) say about how my marriage should work?

Imagine if you bought a lawn mower, and you read through the owner's manual. You read things like, "Caution, you can be hurt if you don't follow these instructions," or "Inspect lawn area and remove debris before mowing," or "Do not use gasoline containing more than 10% ethanol."

Hopefully you wouldn't think, "Mind your own business! Don't tell me how to mow my lawn. I can put whatever I want in my mower!"

You can think that, but you have it all backwards. Instead, you should think, "This company made this mower, they know how to best operate it. They don't want me to get hurt. They want my mower to work well for years. Maybe I should listen to them."

How much more with God and His Word? Remember, He made us, He is God, we are not, and He is good. We should think, "God made marriage. God knows how my marriage operates the best. God doesn't want me to get hurt. God wants my marriage to work well for years. Maybe I should listen to Him."

As for me, I'm studying the Owner's Manual!

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 4:1-5:19
Mark 2:13-3:6
Psalm 36:1-12
Proverbs 10:1-2

Wednesday, February 19

Blaming God

"Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God. Job 1:18-22

This is one of the most powerful stories of faith in the Bible. Job lost all his animals, which were his livelihood. Then all ten of his children died when a house collapsed on them. Finally, he got painful sores all over his body. How in the world did Job avoid getting bitter and blaming God?

We have all questioned God's wisdom in times of trial or loss. We have even questioned God's character. "If He is all powerful, why didn't he stop it? If He is all loving, why did He allow this painful tragedy?" Great questions. Difficult questions. Questions asked by millions around the world daily. Here is what we can learn from Job's tragedy.

Job did not become bitter and blame God because of one, often overlooked, factor. He knew where all these gifts came from. God! Job had a deep, close relationship with God. He knew that God was always good. He knew that "The Lord gave" all of them. James said it this way, "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17).

Trials tempt us to blame God. If we only have a shallow relationship with Him, we can get angry and blame Him. We think what we have is ours—we worked for it, we got it by our own hard work, skills, or even by luck. Then, when things or people are taken away, we blame God. There is a vast difference in the two views of God and His gifts.

Ask God to enable you to experience His love on a deep level so that when you suffer loss you too will not blame God. Instead, you will thank Him for graciously giving you the gift to begin with. By His Spirit, you can thank Him that He will use the tragedy for good, as He did in Job's life.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 7:28-9:6
Mark 3:31-4:25
Psalm 37:12-29
Proverbs 10:5

Waymarks

*The way of the righteous is smooth;
O Upright One, make the path of the righteous level.
Indeed, while following the way of Your judgments, O Lord,
We have waited for You eagerly;
Your name, even Your memory, is the desire of our souls. Isaiah 26:7-8*

Do you know the term *waymarks*? *Merriam-Webster* online tells me that it only appears in their unabridged dictionary, so I guess it's not that common. The definition given is "an object serving as a guide to someone traveling." *Cairn* is the other term I find people are unfamiliar with. But if you have ever hiked the Rockies in Colorado you will know what these are: "the man-made, carefully stacked piles of rocks that appear as signs just after you have despaired that you are on the right path."

In Portugal waymarks are sometimes cairns, but more often short, parallel paint marks on rocks, defining the trail. When John and I were doing a walking tour in Portugal last spring, waymarks seemed extremely important. Spending a night in the mountains without dinner or lodging was not an attractive alternative to finding the next village or town. And these mute symbols reassured us that others had passed this way before, that we were following an established route to our next destination.

A new saying I made up on this trip was "All roads lead everywhere." There are well-worn paths, animal as well as human, all over the countryside. Following a path didn't mean you would arrive at the right place.

On our trip through life as humans, "all roads lead everywhere." But as Christians we have a destination—Heaven! How important it is that we follow the way God has laid out before us. God has even walked this world as a man—He knows the paths here. We look in His guidebook for our directions, and we scan our trail for waymarks other godly wayfarers have left for us to follow.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 6:1-7:27
Mark 3:7-30
Psalm 37:1-11
Proverbs 10:3-4

Thursday, February 20

Bait or Blessing?

And Caleb said, "He who attacks Kiriath-sepher and captures it, I will give him Ach-sah my daughter for a wife." Judges 1:12 ESV

And the men of Israel said, "Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely, he has come up to defy Israel. And the king will enrich the man who kills him with great riches and will give him his daughter and make his father's house free in Israel."

1 Samuel 17:25 ESV

Are the two stories above similar or different? Caleb was a great man of God. He was very courageous; we see that he brought back a faith-filled report as a spy for Moses. He also asked for an inheritance in the Promised Land where there were giants. He set about conquering those lands. When he came to the strongly fortified city of Debir, Caleb told his tribe that he would give his daughter in marriage to the man who conquered this difficult enemy town. Why did he do this? A person could take it that Caleb was using his daughter as a prize or bait to get a difficult city conquered that he didn't want to take himself.

But I believe that he wanted to raise up a godly husband for this highly valued daughter. So he devised a plan to get one for her. He knew that it would take a fine, courageous, and resourceful man to take the difficult city. Accordingly, he offered a test. Othniel rose to the challenge and became a great man and a fine husband to Caleb's daughter.

Several hundred years later, a similar offer was made by King Saul to his troops. He tried to find someone to fight Goliath by offering his daughter as the prize. But we find in the Scriptures that Saul—who should have gone out himself to fight—was afraid to do so. He was using his daughter as bait to get another to do something he was unwilling to do himself.

Two similar situations, two different motivations, two different outcomes. It is important to remember that God is concerned with our heart motives and not just our actions.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 9:7-10:20
Mark 4:26-5:20
Psalm 37:30-40
Proverbs 10:6-7

But Barnabas . . .

Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet. Acts 4:36-37

What do we know about Barnabas? We know he was Jewish and from the tribe of Levi. He was not, however, from Israel. He was from Cyprus. He owned land that was sold so its earnings could be given to fellow believers. Whether that land was in Cyprus or Israel, we don't know. But Barnabas had a great reputation: he was known as the "Son of Encouragement." Characteristic of his life was his building up of people.

We know Barnabas played a role in Paul's life (Acts 9:27). After Paul became a Christian, he went to Jerusalem and tried to associate with believers. In fear, they refused because of Paul's reputation of hating the church. But Barnabas broke through the barriers, knowing that Paul had changed. In Acts 9:27, Barnabas led the rejected Paul to the apostles, explained his conversion, and affirmed that Paul could be trusted.

Paul and Barnabas must have been very close. In Acts 13:1-2 Paul's first missionary journey was initiated by the Holy Spirit when, during their prayer meeting, the Spirit chose Paul and Barnabas to go on mission together. Barnabas was definitely a respected leader among the Christians (Acts 13:7). He was summoned to speak along with Paul on occasion.

It's hard to understand what happened in Acts 15:39, why Paul couldn't agree to take Mark with them after Mark deserted them in the first journey. But Barnabas was so confident of his position that he chose not to defer to Paul but to stand up to him. In fact, he chose to separate and go his own way rather than go on mission with Paul without Mark.

It's the Lord we follow, not fellow Christians or even, sometimes, Christian leaders. Barnabas knew that well.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 11:1-12:8
 Mark 5:21-43
 Psalm 38:1-22
 Proverbs 10:8-9

Just Use SOAP

No human wisdom or understanding or plan can stand against the Lord.

Proverbs 21:30 NLT

I wanted to share a quiet time journal entry I made this week. It follows the S.O.A.P method: Scripture, Observation, Application, Prayer.

Scripture: "No human wisdom or understanding or plan can stand against the Lord" (Proverbs 21:30).

Observation: God has ultimate control in my life and in this world. God has ultimate authority over everything. God is perfectly good.

Application: The truth is that God is: good, He is perfect (without flaw or failure), without sin, **and** He is in ultimate control of my life. This truth *should* give and *does* give me comfort.

Right now, God sees the circumstances of my life. He sees my family, my failures, my future and my dreams. Right now, God sees our church and our ministries. In all of these He has plans that nothing and no one can thwart.

Despite what I feel, despite what it might seem like, God has a plan. Nothing will stop Him from accomplishing His purpose. The Bible says this very thing in Romans 8 and in Psalm 138:8—"The Lord will work out his plans for my life—for your faithful love, O Lord, endures forever. Don't abandon me, for you made me" (NLT). I can rest, knowing that He is good. He is for me. He has a purpose.

Prayer: Lord, You see me, and You know me. You have good plans for my life that no one can stand against. Your plans are good, and ultimately will bring joy. Help me to rest in this truth today.

Church, when we spend a little time applying SOAP to our verses, *so much* comes through.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 13:1-59
 Mark 6:1-29
 Psalm 39:1-13
 Proverbs 10:10

Bitterness

See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled. Hebrews 12:15

Have you noticed the bitterness in our politics, our churches, and even in our own marriages and families? Bitterness, which comes when we are hurt and choose not to forgive others, is destroying our own lives, as well as those around us. If the bad attitude is not confessed and forsaken, it will spread to others like a deadly disease! Many will be defiled. What can you do if you are bitter?

Jesus expressed love this way: "For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). If you are bitter toward others, then you are not experiencing the love and forgiveness of God.

Understanding that God has forgiven you for a whole lifetime of sin should elicit a response of thankfulness, leading you to forgive others for their offences toward you. You can call on God for His grace to have a repentant heart. Start with yourself. You must "get the beam out of your own eye." You must get your own heart right with God and experience His forgiveness and love so that you can then freely forgive others.

By the way, the person who offended you may never say he is sorry or prove he can be trusted. God commands us to forgive others as He forgave us—unconditionally. He forgave us *before* there was any change of heart on our part! Jesus offered forgiveness while hanging on the cross. This was *before* any of us turned to Him. He set the standard.

We must forgive others as He forgave us: "Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:32). Don't wait to feel forgiving. Ask God to empower you to forgive despite your feelings.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 14:1-57
 Mark 6:30-56
 Psalm 40:1-10
 Proverbs 10:11-12

Handicaps

My grace is sufficient for you for power is perfected in weakness. Most gladly, therefore I will boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Handicaps. This is what Paul is describing—things that handicap our lives. To live life successfully, God taught him to boast about his handicaps. Why would we boast about our handicaps? These are not things we should be proud of. There are three reasons we should bring our handicaps out of the closet. Take note.

God has allowed us to have handicaps so that we can experience His grace. Handicaps keep us humble. God gives grace to the humble. If we didn't have weaknesses, we would easily become arrogant.

God allows handicaps so that His power will show through us. God wants to teach us that the Christian life has to be lived according to His power, and not ours.

God uses our weaknesses to influence others for Christ. Read through the list of difficulties Paul faced (2 Corinthians 1:8-10, 4:7-11, 6:4-10, 11:22-33). Paul's credentials were his trials and weaknesses, not his certificates, not his religious training.

C.S. Lewis said of pastors, "The pastor who is most Christ-like . . . is not the one who is most gloriously fulfilled in every moment of his ministry, but the one whose ministry has in it unbelievable elements of crucifixion." Let us boast and let us be well content with the handicaps God has allowed in our lives.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 15:1-16:28
 Mark 7:1-23
 Psalm 40:11-17
 Proverbs 10:13-14

The Cave of Adullam

David departed from there and escaped to the cave of Adullam. And when his brothers and all his father's house heard it, they went down there to him. And everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was bitter in soul [or, discontented], gathered to him. 1 Samuel 22:1-2

What do we do when life sends us back to the drawing board? There are times when it seems that all is lost, all gain is gone, that we are left with empty hands. In the situation David was in when he went to the cave of Adullam, this is how he must have felt. He had been successful as a courageous shepherd, as musician and armor bearer to Saul, as giant-slayer to Goliath, and now he was a fugitive with Saul irrationally trying to kill him. David went out of the court and Saul's kingdom into the wilderness. Have you experienced a "wilderness time"? But what happens to David?

In this situation David is like Christ. God makes David the new center of a new kingdom. Four hundred men gather to him. They have left behind the old structures of their lives to start over again, centering their lives around loyalty to David. David finds that he is no longer alone in the cave of Adullam. God is creating something new around him. And God sends His prophet Gad to tell David, "Time to leave the cave. Go back to your territory of Judah." A wilderness time allows God to do something new.

God starts David on a new path by bringing him men to disciple. It's time for us as Great Commission Christians to get back to our beginnings and focus again on disciple-making. A Barna survey a few years ago revealed that most people in churches don't even know what the Great Commission is. We need to focus less on church buildings and programs and salaries, and more on discipling men and women who will share their lives and faith with others who will share with others. Christ said, "I will build My church." And He started with His disciples.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 16:29-18:30

Mark 7:24-8:10

Psalm 41:1-13

Proverbs 10:15-16

Thursday, February 27

More than "Just OK"

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. Romans 5:10

AT&T has a commercial "Just ok is not ok!" It goes something like this: A couple is in a hospital room talking to the nurse before the husband goes under surgery.

The wife asks the nurse, "Have you ever worked for Doctor Francis?"

The nurse replies: "Oh yeah! He's ok!"

With concerned faces the husband in his hospital gown asks for him and his wife, "Just . . . ok?"

Then enters the doctor, bragging: "Guess who just got reinstated? Well, . . . not officially." Then he looks at the concerned couple and asks: "Nervous?"

The husband says "Yeah." To which the doctor replies, "Yeah, me too!" There's a long pause, and then the doctor says, "Don't worry about it! We'll figure it out! I'll see ya in there!"

The absurdity of going under the knife with a "just ok" surgeon is no more absurd than trying to find a way of salvation apart from Christ. Paul concluded in Romans 7:24-25, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Later he explains: "For what the Law could not do [save us], weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin" (Romans 8:3).

God sent His best, His only Son, to save us. There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. It's only Jesus. And when God raised Him from the dead, He sealed the deal, affirming His approval that our salvation is secure. He proved it by resurrecting Jesus; He promises to resurrect us.

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 20:22-22:16

Mark 9:1-29

Psalm 43:1-5

Proverbs 10:18

Who Protects the Church?

Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Acts 17:11

Recently I heard a well-known Bible teacher on the radio speaking about the importance of pastors teaching their congregations accurately from the word of God. He exclaimed, "If you [pastors] fall into error, the whole church will follow you, and there is no hope for them." Something about what he said upset me. Was his warning true? If the pastor falls into heresy, will the entire congregation follow him off the cliff?

Every pastor has a serious responsibility to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to lead him into the truth, practice it himself, and then teach it to the saints for their edification. But what happens when there is too much dependence on the pastor and not enough on the Holy Spirit? This creates an unhealthy situation that is ripe for heresy! What then are the ingredients for a healthy church that is protected from heresy?

The Apostle Paul had just spoken to Bereans about Jesus and the gospel. Although he spoke with conviction and from a lifetime of experience with Jesus Christ, they did not accept his teaching carte blanche, but chose to study the Scriptures to verify Paul's teaching. They were eternally declared "noble-minded" for doing so. They received the word with great eagerness, *and* they had the integrity to examine the Scriptures daily to see if it was true. We read in Ephesians 4:11-16 that teachers are to equip the saints—to help each one mature in his or her dependence on Jesus Christ and His word. This is the only thing that prevents a church from following a pastor off the cliffs of heresy.

Are you making disciples that are noble-minded and have a vital, growing relationship with the Head, Jesus Christ?

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 19:1-20:21

Mark 8:11-38

Psalm 42:1-11

Proverbs 10:17

Friday, February 28

Amazing Confidence

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

For many of us, this verse seems too good to be true. Let's notice first of all that there is **now** no condemnation. We're not talking only about a future event, but a current reality. A believer in Christ can live in the assurance that he is currently—right now—justified (declared righteous) by God and not condemned.

The word *condemned* refers to being under the sentence of damnation. Romans 5:16-18 tells us that we were once all condemned. But now, in Christ, there is no condemnation. Upon faith in Christ, we move from a sentence of condemnation to a position of no condemnation.

Stop and think about this: **God does not condemn you!**

Repeat it to yourself a thousand times if you must! This is a truth that, if you believe it, will free you to walk with amazing confidence.

"But wait," you ask, "why then do I still feel condemned?"

Let me suggest three potential reasons you feel condemned.

First, it's possible you've not really trusted Christ for His salvation. Attending church doesn't make you a believer. Being sorrowful doesn't make you a believer. Even "asking Christ into your heart" might not make you a believer. A true believer in Christ has turned from her own way and put her faith in Jesus Christ to be her Lord and Savior. A believer doesn't just believe certain information about Jesus; rather, he puts his faith in Jesus. He's trusting in Jesus, counting on Jesus, relying on Jesus to be his Savior and the One who can make him right with God. May I encourage you, seek the Lord until you can say with assurance that you have truly put your faith in Jesus Christ. Your salvation is too important to not make sure you have it! (Two more potential reasons tomorrow.)

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One-Year Bible Reading

Leviticus 22:17-23:44

Mark 9:30-10:12

Psalm 44:1-8

Proverbs 10:19

Keep Your Head Up!

Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:1

Yesterday we talked about a potential reason you may feel under God's disapproval or condemnation. Today let's look at two other reasons.

Assuming you have truly believed in Jesus Christ, there could be another reason you feel condemned. You have a spiritual adversary, the devil. Never underestimate his schemes nor his hatred of you. One of his tactics is to accuse you. In fact, he is known as "the accuser of the brethren" because he accuses us non-stop, day and night (Revelations 12:10). Don't listen to him. Remember your Advocate, Jesus Christ, who never ceases to defend you before God (1 John 2:1-2). Fight the devil. Resist his accusations. In time, he will stop if you continue to claim your victory and freedom in Christ (James 4:7). Oh, and the next time he reminds you of your past, remind him of his future (Revelations 20:10).

Finally, sometimes we condemn ourselves. I think this is often just us giving in to the accusations of the evil one that I spoke about above. Whatever the source, we get down on ourselves for our failures. This may express itself in discouragement, self-hatred, or some other form of destructive thinking. There's no need for this. Not only are these attitudes not helpful, they're actually quite harmful. When these thoughts creep into your thinking, remind yourself that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. No matter how badly you've blown it, no matter what the loss, no matter the circumstance—what matters most of all, your eternal standing with God, is secure. You are not condemned! You will go to heaven where, for the rest of eternity, the things that so bother you now will seem so insignificant. Keep this perspective and keep your head up, for ***God does not condemn you!***

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