

# DEAD CHURCH

YOU HAVE A REPUTATION THAT YOU ARE ALIVE,  
BUT YOU ARE DEAD

JOSH & TESS TUCKER

*Dead Church: You Have A Reputation That You Are Alive, But You Are Dead*  
(First Edition)

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## DEDICATION

To those who are willing to take the red pill.



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“...You have a reputation that you are alive,  
but really you are dead.  
...Everyone who has ears should hear and obey  
what the Spirit says to the churches.”  
Revelation 3:1-6



# Chapter 1

## The Apostasy of the American Church

We have formatted this book differently than most Christian literature.

Instead of citing Bible chapters and verse numbers next to the quotes, we've inserted all our citations as footnotes. We did this because we live in a culture that is very familiar with the Bible (for the most part), and chapter and verse numbers trigger a feeling of familiarity – *oh yeah, I know what that verse says*.

This book discusses many, many verses that Christians think they already know... but their actions prove that they do not understand what those verses *mean*.

We hope this format helps you not gloss over those verses.

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**I**n the book of Acts, we read about an unstoppable group of people – the Early Church. It was the only time in history when Christians were taught directly by the apostles – people who walked with Jesus in the flesh. They taught original Christianity – it was pure, it was untainted.

The stories we read about the early Church make these people seem almost alien because they were so unlike all the other people around them. They were so different than everyone else.

Most of us today read these stories in our Bibles and try to push away a nagging question – why don't our lives look anything like the book of Acts today? Why does the Church look so different today?

Maybe some of us try to convince ourselves that our lives do look a little like that – that we experience the power of God sometimes, and that our lives are changed, too. But if we're being really honest, we can't actually remember a time when we saw thousands of people get saved all at once,<sup>1</sup> or the last time we were part of a community where people were actually sharing everything they owned and no one had any needs.<sup>2</sup>

What we call Christianity today is just not the same kind of Christianity we read about then. So, what happened? What's wrong? And what do we do

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:41

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35

about it?

These are the questions we'll be addressing in this book, *Dead Church*.

This book is named *Dead Church* for the same reason Jesus called the Church of Sardis a dead church:

"I know what you do. You have a reputation that you are alive, but really you are dead... I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants... Everyone who has ears should hear and obey what the Spirit says to the churches."<sup>1</sup>

What did Jesus mean by *dead*?

Jesus used the word *dead* to describe people who called themselves Christians but who were on the verge of being rejected by Jesus. After all, Jesus continued in his letter to the church in Sardis by saying, "...you must wake up, or I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."<sup>2</sup>

According to Jesus, if a Christian thinks that they're alive, and if everyone else thinks of them as alive, but in actuality they're dead, it means they're not actually a Christian at all! Jesus was saying to that person, "When I come like a thief in the night, I'm not going to be coming *for* you. I'm going to come *against* you. So, you need to wake up!" Essentially, he was saying, "You think you have salvation, but you don't!"

According to many passages of Scripture, a person is dead before they are joined to Jesus. For example, Paul said, "In the past you were dead because of your sins and the things you did against God. Yes, in the past you lived the way the world lives... Though we were spiritually dead because of the things we did against God, he brought us to life with Christ."<sup>3</sup>

A person is dead before they receive the life of Jesus, and they are alive after being brought to life with Christ. So, if a person is calling themselves a Christian but Jesus is calling them dead, then Jesus is saying that that person is deceived – they think they have life, but really they're still completely dead and without true hope. A dead Christian is not a Christian at all. A dead "Christian" is only deceived into thinking he's a Christian.

Jesus was saying it's possible for a person (or an entire church) to think that they're alive – that they're Christians, that they have life with Jesus, that they're saved – when in fact, they're actually still dead – dead in their sins, without hope, without Jesus, and without salvation.

Think about the implications of that for the Church today. Think about the implications of that for yourself.

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 3:1-6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:3

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:1-2, 5

## DEAD CHURCH

If it's possible for people to think they're alive, but actually be dead – to think they're Christians, but not actually be Christians – to think they're saved, but not actually be saved – then it's extremely important that we identify how to know the difference. After all, everybody thought the church in Sardis was alive – that was their reputation. But Jesus thought they were dead. So clearly everyone had the wrong definition of what it means to be alive. Everyone had the wrong definition of what it means to be a Christian!

What if that's true today? What if the Church today has the wrong definition of what it means to be a Christian?

The title *Dead Church* applies for two reasons:

First, because we live in a place and time in which the Western Church has a reputation of being alive. But, like the church in Sardis, what if everyone has the wrong definition of what it means to be alive? What if Christians today are deceived? What if, for whatever reason, Christians today don't know what it even means to be a Christian? According to Jesus, you can be dead and not realize it. According to Jesus, you can be dead while being fully convinced that you're alive. What if that's the state of the Church today? What if that's you? *Dead Church* addresses some of the ways that Christians today have the wrong definitions – ways they think they're alive, when really they might be dead.

Second, we named this book *Dead Church* because when Jesus wrote to the church in Sardis, he didn't leave them without hope. He told them to wake up. He told them to repent. He told them to overcome, and that if they overcame, he wouldn't erase their names from the book of life. In short, he told them that there was something they could do about it. It wasn't too late! They still had a chance! We wrote *Dead Church* because we want to see a dead Church come alive – we want to see them wake up – we want to see them repent – we want to see their names written in the book of life.

But to help a dead Church come alive, we must figure out what it means to be alive in the first place. To be able to help a dead Church mature and become all she is meant to be, we must first figure out what is wrong so she can change.

To recognize how a dead Church is dead, and how she can come alive again, we must recognize what Scripture teaches – not just individual verses here and there, but as a whole. And we must recognize the fact that the Old Testament provides us with examples that are warnings for us who live in the Church age.

The whole concept of *having a reputation of being alive, while actually being dead*, is not unique to the people who lived in Sardis. The entire Old Testament is filled with examples of people like that. And, as Paul said, “The things that happened to those people are examples. They were written down to warn

us...”<sup>1</sup>

The stories in the Old Testament are meant to be examples for us. They were written down to teach us. So, what does the Old Testament teach us about thinking we’re alive when we’re actually dead?

In the Old Testament, while giving the Law to the nation of Israel, Moses gave the people this sober warning:

“I know that after I die you will become completely evil. You will turn away from the commands I have given you. Terrible things will happen to you in the future when you do what the LORD says is evil, and you will make him angry with the work of your hands.”<sup>2</sup>

This verse is just one example out of many throughout Deuteronomy 28-32 in which Moses repeatedly warned the Israelites that they would turn away from God.<sup>3</sup> In these chapters, Moses gave a very clear warning to the people that one day they would fall away from God, they would reject him, and as a result God would drive them into exile. It’s an incredible warning to read because it’s exactly what ended up happening to Israel over the course of the following eight hundred years or so.

Moses warned them ahead of time. He warned them what they would do. He warned them what would happen to them. The nation of Israel had this warning from Moses with them every day. Right there, in their own nation’s law, they were being told that the time would come when they would turn from God and be punished as a result.

How did they still let it happen?

Contrary to what a lot of Christians think, the nation of Israel and the nation of Judah didn’t see themselves as people who had abandoned God. A lot of people don’t realize this because the Bible was written from God’s perspective – we read God’s words about all the evil they were doing, and we just assume that their evil actions were as obvious to them as they are to us when we read about them today. But that wasn’t their perspective.

Think of it this way: If I meet a man who is five-feet tall, will I think he’s short? Yes. But will a three-year-old think he’s short? No. A three-year-old would think he’s tall. We have different perspectives. The Bible is written from God’s perspective, and when we read it, we can clearly see that the Israelites were coming up short. But, if we read between the lines and look at the actions and responses of the Israelites, we can see that they had a different perspective – they thought they were “tall”.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:11

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 31:29

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Leviticus 26:14-46; Deuteronomy 4:25-31, 28:15-68, 29:16-29, 30:1, 31:15-29, 32:15-18, 32:21-43

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The people of Israel thought they were obeying God and worshipping him. They thought everything was perfectly okay! They didn't see themselves as people who had rebelled against God or abandoned him.

In other words, they thought they were alive... but God said they were dead.

Here are some examples:

When God sent the prophet Isaiah to Israel to tell them to repent, he said, "The LORD says, 'I do not want all these sacrifices. I have had enough of your burnt sacrifices of male sheep and fat from fattened cattle. I am not pleased by the blood of bulls, lambs, and goats. You worship me, but who asked you to do all this running in and out of my courts? Don't continue bringing me worthless sacrifices! I hate the incense you burn. I can't stand your New Moons, Sabbaths, and sacred assemblies; I can't stand the evil you do in your holy meetings. I hate your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts. They have become a burden to me, and I can no longer tolerate them. When you raise your arms to me in prayer, I will refuse to look at you. Even if you say many prayers, I will not listen to you...'"<sup>1</sup>

Notice the things the people did in this passage:

- They brought sacrifices to God
- They worshiped God
- They kept the New Moon feasts that God told them to keep in the Law
- They kept the Sabbath that God told them to keep in the Law
- They had the sacred assemblies that God told them to keep in the Law
- They had holy meetings
- They kept all the appointed feasts from the Law
- They raised their arms to God in prayer

Does this sound like a group of people who have fallen away from God? When you think of the rebellion of ancient Israel, is this what you picture?

This is the biblical description of the people who killed the prophets. We tend to picture them sitting around casually carving wooden statues and randomly calling them gods. We picture them as blatantly ignoring everything

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 1:11-15

Moses wrote, refusing to pray to God, and refusing to bring sacrifices to him. But that's not what they were doing.

These people were still worshipping God, they were still bringing him their sacrifices, they were still keeping the feasts and Sabbaths, they were still meeting together, and they were still praying. Yet God said he hated what they were doing, and he wouldn't listen to their prayers.

Here's another example:

“The LORD says, ‘Shout out loud. Don’t hold back. Lift up your voice like a trumpet. Tell my people what they have done against their God; tell the family of Jacob about their sins. They seek me every day and delight to learn my ways. They act just like a nation that does what is right, that obeys the commands of its God. They ask me to judge them fairly. They want to draw near to God. They say, “Why have we fasted, but you didn’t see? Why have we afflicted ourselves, but you didn’t notice?”’ But the LORD says, ‘Look, you do what pleases yourselves on these fast days, and you oppress your workers... You cannot do these things as you do now and believe your prayers are heard in heaven. Is this the fast that I want? Do I want a day when people afflict themselves? I don’t want people just to bow their heads like a plant, stretching out on sackcloth and ashes. Is this what you call a fast? Do you really think this pleases the LORD?’”<sup>1</sup>

Notice what the people did in this passage:

- They sought God every day
- They delighted to learn his ways
- They acted as if they were people who did what was right
- They acted as if they were people who obeyed God
- They asked God for just judgment
- They wanted to draw near to God
- They fasted before God
- They prayed to God
- They bowed their heads to God

This is the description of Israel during the midst of their rebellion – at the height of their apostasy! They were not people who thought they were in rebellion! They were not people who had turned their backs on God.

God's perspective was that they were evil, which is what we're so familiar with – but their own perspective was that they were seeking God,

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:1-5



delighting in him, drawing near to him, fasting to him, and praying to him. They thought they were people who did what was right. They thought they were people who obeyed God.

God said through the prophet Jeremiah, “Even the storks in the sky know the right times to do things. The doves, swallows, and cranes know when it is time to migrate. But my people don’t know what the LORD wants them to do. You keep saying, ‘We are wise, because we have the teachings of the LORD.’ But actually, those who explain the Scriptures have written lies with their pens.”<sup>1</sup>

We can see from this that the people of Judah were reading the teaching of the Lord, and they believed it gave them wisdom! They valued it! They thought it was wise to study Scripture and learn what Scripture meant! They thought they had more wisdom than all the other nations, because unlike those heathens, they had the teachings of God!

Over and over, if we look for the perspective of the people who were about to be judged, we can see that they didn’t realize they were disobeying God at all! They thought they still served God. They thought they still worshiped God.

This theme runs throughout all the writings of the prophets. When we read the writings of the prophets, we can see clearly that the people thought they were following God.

When Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, King Zedekiah (one of the evil kings of Judah) sent for Jeremiah in order to receive a word from the Lord.<sup>2</sup> He wasn’t someone who thought he had rejected God! He wanted a word from God!

We see in Jeremiah, as well as in many other places, that Israel was full of false prophets<sup>3</sup> – and, yes, Christians understand that Israel was full of false prophets – but those false prophets were all coming in the name of the Lord, telling the people that they were sent by God! The people thought they were following God – and we see in many of the stories that even the false prophets themselves actually thought they were true prophets of God!<sup>4</sup>

We can also see that the people wanted to kill Jeremiah – not because they hated God and hated his prophet, but because they thought Jeremiah was speaking evil against God when he said that the Temple of the Lord would be torn down.<sup>5</sup> They thought they were defending God!

We see that the people were coming to Ezekiel to hear what God had

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 8:7-8

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 21

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Isaiah 3:12; Jeremiah 14:14-16, 23:9-32; Lamentations 2:14; Ezekiel 13

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 28

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 26:7-9

to say.<sup>1</sup>

In Hosea, we see the people were worshiping God and bringing him sacrifices.<sup>2</sup>

In Amos, we see that the people claimed that the Lord was with them, they kept the feasts, held sacred assemblies, offered sacrifices, sang songs, and excitedly anticipated the “day of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

Over and over, throughout the writings of the prophets we can see that the people of Israel were still offering sacrifices to God, they were still getting advice from God’s prophets, they were still keeping God’s feasts, they were still worshipping at the Temple, they were still praying to God, they were still fasting to God, they were still singing songs to God, they were still reading Scripture, they were still looking for a word from God, they were still listening to prophecy, they were still prophesying, and many other things like these.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the people didn’t recognize that they had turned their backs on God like Moses had prophesied. The people had a reputation of being alive. They thought of themselves as alive and in close relationship with God.

But really, they were dead.

In the end, God judged the nation. He drove them into exile, and he allowed his own Temple to be burned to the ground.

Moses had warned them about this when he gave them the Law. God warned the people before it happened by sending some of his own prophets to them. They had warnings. They were told it was coming. Yet despite all this, the people were shocked and caught completely off-guard when Jerusalem fell, thousands died, the Temple was burned to the ground, and the survivors were led off into exile. Somehow, despite all the warnings, no one saw it coming. The God they thought they worshiped came against them unexpectedly... like a thief in the night.

They were warned. They were told it would happen. But no one took it to heart. No one evaluated their culture to see if Moses’ warnings had come true.

This should be a sober warning and example for us in the Church Age, because just like Moses warned the people of Israel about their apostasy and exile long before it happened, Jesus and the apostles wrote similar warnings to the Church.

Paul said, “Brothers and sisters, we have something to say about the

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Ezekiel 33:30-33

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Hosea 5:6-7

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Amos 5:14, 5:18-24

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 2:23, 2:34-35, 3:10, 7:2-15, 8:8-9, 12:2, 14:11-16, 16:10-13, 18:18, 20:1-6, 21:1-14, 23:16-22, 23:30-32, 26:7-9, 27:14-15, 28:1-17, 36:6, 36:9, 37:17; Ezekiel 20:1-3, 20:30-31, 33:30-33; Hosea 5:6-7, 8:1-3, 8:12-14; Amos 5:14, 5:18-24; Micah 3:11-12; Zechariah 7:4-13; Malachi 1:6-14, 2:11-17

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coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and the time when we will meet together with him... Do not let anyone deceive you in any way. That day of the Lord will not come until the apostasy happens..."<sup>1</sup>

The word *apostasy* was a Greek word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (called the Septuagint) to describe the actions of Israel during their rebellion. For example, in the Septuagint, Hezekiah (a good king of Judah) said that their fathers were *apostate* and did what was evil before the Lord.<sup>2</sup> Also, the actions of King Manasseh were called *apostasy*.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the word *apostasy* was used to describe the actions of the Jews who rebelled against God during the time of the Maccabees.<sup>4</sup>

The word *apostasy* or *apostate* essentially means *falling away* or *fallen away* respectively. Paul was saying that the day Jesus returns will not happen until the Church first falls away – just like Israel did in the Old Testament. His original audience would have understood what he was saying because, to them, the word *apostasy* referred to Israel's rebellion against God.

Paul was warning that the Church would also fall away before Jesus returns.

Paul wrote other similar warnings, too:

"Now the Spirit clearly says that in the later times some people will abandon the faith. They will follow deceiving spirits and teachings of demons..."<sup>5</sup>

"I know that after I am gone, some people will come like wild wolves and try to destroy the flock. Even some from your own group will rise up and twist the truth and will lead away followers after them. So be careful!"<sup>6</sup>

"...the time will come when people will not listen to the true teaching but will find many more teachers who please them by saying the things they want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and will begin to follow false stories."<sup>7</sup>

He also said, "Remember this! In the last days there will be terrible times, because people will love themselves, love money, brag, and be arrogant. They will say evil things against others and will not obey their parents or be grateful or be holy. They will not love others, will refuse to forgive, will gossip, and will not control themselves. They will be cruel, will hate what is good, will turn against their friends, and will be reckless. They will be conceited, will love

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Chronicles 29:5-7, 29:19, 30:7

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Chronicles 33:18-19

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 Maccabees 1:11-15, 2:15, 2:19

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 4:1

<sup>6</sup> Acts 20:29-31

<sup>7</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-4

pleasure instead of God, and will act as if they serve God but will not have his power. Avoid those people.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s important to note here that when Paul said this, he was not saying the *world* will be like this – that’s what a lot of Christians today think. They think Paul was saying that this is what the world will look like in the last days and it’s going to be terrible. But Paul was not talking about the world; he was talking about the Church. He was saying that this is what the Church will look like. We know this because he ended this description by saying, “Avoid those people,” and elsewhere Paul clarified that when he said to avoid people who do certain things, he was not talking about the world – he was talking about those in the Church who do those things.<sup>2</sup>

So, Paul was saying that in the last days, it’s going to be terrible because the Church will be full of people who love themselves, love money, brag, etc. In this passage, Paul was saying the same thing he said elsewhere: Apostasy is coming. People will abandon the faith.

There are many other warnings just like this all throughout the New Testament.<sup>3</sup> Jesus warned us, Paul wrote about it many times, Peter warned us, and the entire book of Jude is filled with these warnings.

The point is, when Jesus and the apostles established the New Covenant, they warned us – just like Moses warned Israel, Jesus and the apostles warned us that the time would come when the Church would fall away from the truth and live in apostasy.

And just like we tend to read the Old Testament and not recognize that it was written from God’s perspective, we also tend to read the New Testament and assume that their warnings are something we’re going to easily see when it happens. For example, we read the book of Jude and we never consider, “What if Jude was describing me? What if he was describing today’s Church culture? What if his description is God’s perspective of my life?” Or, we read Paul’s warning mentioned above (about how it will be terrible times because people will love themselves, money, and pleasure) and we never consider, “What if I’m that person who loves money and pleasure instead of God?”

Just like Israel in the Old Testament, so many Christians are aware of these verses. But, they think it means people will be aware of the fact that they’re no longer following God. They think it means people will stop going to Church. They think it means people will stop thinking of themselves as Christians. But that’s not what Scripture warned us about – the New

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 13:24-30, 24:10-13; Mark 4:1-20; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 2 Peter 2:1-22

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Testament writers repeatedly warned us that people would be deceived.<sup>1</sup>

By its very definition, if people are deceived, that means they don't know.

The Bible warned us that the Church would fall away and people would be deceived. That means Jesus and the apostles warned us that the Church would fall into apostasy, but those apostate people would still go to Church, they would still believe in God, they would still read their Bibles, they would still pray, they would still sing worship songs, and many other things like these.

Just like the Israelites in the Old Testament, their perspective will be that they are serving God; but God's perspective will be that they have committed adultery against him, apostasy against him, and have completely abandoned him.

Very few Christians recognize the example in the Old Testament: God warned his people that they would fall away and that it would result in destruction, he gave them very clear warnings, but despite all this, the people didn't recognize that they already had fallen away. They had holy meetings for God, raised their arms in prayer to God, bowed their heads to God, sang worship songs to God, fasted for God, prophesied for God, read Scripture, and many other similar things. They didn't recognize that the apostasy had already happened. Convinced that they were serving God, convinced that they were just fine, they surrounded themselves with false prophets and false teachers who reinforced what they already believed and told them what they wanted to hear.

We should expect the fulfillment of the New Testament warnings to be similar. We have been warned by Jesus and the apostles that the Church would fall away, and that it would result in destruction. We were given very clear warnings. But despite the warnings, Christians won't recognize the apostasy. They will have holy meetings, raise their arms in prayer, bow their heads, sing worship songs, fast, prophesy, read Scripture, and many other similar things. They won't recognize that it has already happened. Convinced that they are serving God, convinced that they are perfectly fine, they will surround themselves with false prophets, false teachers, and other false believers who will reinforce what they already believe, and reassure them by telling them all the things they want to hear.

The warnings given to Israel were the same warnings given to the Church. We should expect the fulfillment of those warnings to be identical as well.

Despite the countless times Scripture tells us that people will be deceived, most Christians still assume that they would recognize apostasy if

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Mark 13:6; 2 Peter 2:1-2, 2:18-19

they saw it. Most Christians ignore the warnings and continue living life exactly like all the other Christians around them.

Very few Christians recognize another lesson from the Old Testament: the apostasy committed in Israel in the Old Testament was not a *minority* of the people. In other words, the apostasy was committed by *the overwhelming majority*. It was such a vast majority that Elijah honestly thought he was the only person left who truly served God.<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah described himself as “sitting alone.”<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament warns us that it will be the same with the Church. Many Christians might think the apostasy is only that denomination over there, or these Christians here who have accepted some new teaching. But that’s denying what Scripture says. Paul said the times will be terrible because so many people will be apostate. Jesus said you will be able to recognize a false teacher simply by seeing if they’re widely loved.<sup>3</sup> Jesus warned us that few would find the path to life,<sup>4</sup> but the apostles warned us that many would be deceived.

The pattern in Scripture is abundantly clear: God works with a minority – a remnant – look at Noah, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and Caleb, Gideon, Elijah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets. Look at the many thousands who followed Jesus around, yet he only showed himself to five hundred when he resurrected.

Most people will not choose to follow him – even if they think they did.

Peter wrote a warning to Christians. He said, “There used to be false prophets among God’s people just as you will have some false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce things that are wrong – teachings that will cause people to be lost.”<sup>5</sup>

Peter was warning us that there would be many false teachings circling around that fool many people into thinking they are saved when they really are not. Just like in Israel, these false teachings would give people a confidence that they are right with God. People would be confident that they are truly saved and truly born again. But because they are believing a lie instead of the truth, their confidence does them no good.

This is exactly what has happened in the Church. Countless people go in and out of their church services every Sunday, they read their Bibles, they pray, they sing worship songs, and they have emotional experiences when they

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Kings 19:1-18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 16:16-17

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Luke 6:26

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14; Luke 13:22-27

<sup>5</sup> 2 Peter 2:1

feel close to God. They go seek out prophecy, and they themselves prophesy. But they don't submit to Jesus, their lives don't change, they continue in sin, and they are dead.

As Jesus warned the church in Sardis, if these people do not repent, the day of the Lord will come against them like a thief in the night – just like it did to apostate Israel in the Old Testament.

We need to understand the difference between a dead Church and a living Church.

Throughout this book, we are going to address the following topics:

We're going to talk about false teaching. The New Testament is full of warnings about false teachers. We're going to look at those warnings. We're going to look at how the Bible says to recognize and avoid false teaching. And we're going to look at how prevalent false teaching is in the Church today.

We're going to address *faith*, *repentance*, and *love*, and how we (the Church) have adopted the wrong definitions of these words. We're going to look at how the Bible defines *faith*, *repentance*, and *love*, and we're going to show how our wrong definitions have affected everything about our mindset, our actions, the way we view the Bible, and what we think we understand. In short, we're going to look at how our wrong definitions of *faith*, *repentance*, and *love*, have (like Sardis) given us the wrong definition of what it means to be alive.

We're going to talk about mainstream Christian views about the gospel, legalism, and condemnation. We're going to point out how many lies we've just accepted, how many things we just assume, and how much about what we believe is simply not biblical at all.

We're going to look at the modern Christian life, and all the things that we think of today as “what the Christian life should look like.” We're then going to compare those things to the lives of the Pharisees, and then compare them to the commands Jesus gave his followers. And we'll evaluate whether the modern Christian life looks more like what Jesus came to establish, or what Jesus came to oppose.

We're going to look at the practical examples the Bible gives about what it really means to seek first the kingdom of God and love him above everything, and how our actions clearly show us whether we're doing that or not.

We're going to talk about what it truly means to abide in Jesus, and when we should expect our prayers to be answered and when we should not expect them to be answered, and why. We'll look at some conditions the Bible gives for these promises – conditions that Christians usually overlook.

If it's possible to think you're alive when you're not, and if it's possible

to think you're a Christian when you're not, and if false teaching is as prevalent as the Bible says it will be, then Christians need a way to know the difference between what is true and what are lies. We'll look at how the Bible tells us exactly how we can know.

We're going to look at apostasy one more time. Based on everything else we discuss in this book, how can a Christian have assurance of salvation and know that they're not living in apostasy? Furthermore – how do we respond to apostasy when we see it in the Church?

Finally, we'll wrap up the book by going over dozens of relevant Scripture verses on some of the topics we're discussing to show that these are things the Bible teaches consistently. The Bible is not a collection of individual, unrelated verses. The Bible teaches the same things from beginning to end. In other words, these topics are things that God brings up a lot throughout the Bible. And if they're things God brings up a lot in the Bible, then they're things God cares about a lot. And if God has something that he cares about a lot, then we would do well to pay close attention to what he has to say.

This book was born out of a deep desire to see the Church restored to what we see in the book of Acts – a Church walking in the kind of love, power, and life that is unstoppable. A Church bearing the kind of fruit we are supposed to bear. A Church that looks like Jesus. This book was written because I deeply love the Church of Jesus. I love his bride, and I want to see her grow out of the human traditions that are holding her back, and step into maturity. I want to see Christians come to experience true life – the kind of life we read about in the book of Acts. I want to see Christians begin to realize just how worthwhile it is to actually surrender everything and live for Jesus. I want to see Christians realize what that even means!

Some of what is written in this book might challenge you. It might go against what you've always thought or what you've always been taught. It might be uncomfortable. It might even be downright painful at times. But I encourage you to go to Scripture yourself to see if what I say is true. Go to Scripture, read it, and ask the Holy Spirit to help you understand what is true. Because you must know the truth. If it's possible for a person to think they're alive, and to live in a culture that has a reputation of being alive, when they're actually dead, then it's possible that what you've always thought and what you've always been taught is not actually the truth – and perhaps you don't have the life you think you have.

I don't expect or ask that anyone take my word for it. I don't want you to take my word for it. I just want to challenge you to go to Scripture and make sure that your perspective matches God's perspective. And if it doesn't, what needs to change?



DEAD CHURCH

I pray that God our Father and the Lord Jesus would bless you and teach you as you read the rest of this book.

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(A free video version of this book is also available on  
[www.ActsInitiative.com](http://www.ActsInitiative.com).)

# Chapter 2

## We've Become Christian Pharisees

Throughout this book we will address many things Christians commonly misunderstand in the Church today. But in order for us to address those topics, we must first lay a foundation so we understand *why* it's so important that we address these things.

Many Christians in recent years have begun asking: *Why do we do what we do? Why do we do Church on Sunday the way we do it? Why do we live the way we live? When I read the Bible, I see people doing things differently than what we do today. Why is that?*

They're questioning the status-quo. They're re-evaluating how we do Church. It is often referred to as the *House-Church Movement*.

Personally, I have greatly benefited from people asking these questions. They are changing standard Christian practices; they're changing the way we approach Church. They are sparking questions and re-evaluating common traditions. Maybe you haven't been a part of those movements; maybe you haven't even heard of them. But essentially, these people are saying, "We want to look like what they looked like in the Bible in the Book of Acts. We don't want to look like religion."

They're recognizing that Christianity has largely become "religious" today. They are addressing the rituals and customs – the things we do within this religious version of Christianity. They're meeting in homes instead of church buildings, they're eating meals together, and they're having everyone actively participate in their meetings. They're looking at the way Church was done in the first century, and they're trying to imitate it.

They want to see Christianity restored to what we see in the book of Acts. They want to see Christianity restored to what God always intended it to be.

I love what these folks are doing, and I've benefited a lot from their questions as they challenged me to re-think what Church is supposed to look like. I've benefited as they've challenged me to ask questions rather than just let myself get swept away by the flow of the vast majority.

However, something I've noticed as I've observed these movements is that they're questioning *what* we do – they're questioning the rituals, they're questioning the traditions – but a lot of people are not questioning the theology and doctrines behind those rituals.

They're re-evaluating the traditions and changing the structure of

Church to get that structure in line with what we see in the Bible, but they're not re-evaluating or changing the beliefs, doctrines, theology and teaching which we received from the same men who gave us the religious traditions and structures in the first place.

For example, a popular house-church movement is changing everything about how they function as a Church. They're meeting in homes, they're keeping the groups small, they're meeting more than once a week, they're having an open discussion instead of the traditional sermon, and they're eating meals together. But, when they meet, instead of reading Scripture and Scripture alone, they're reading Scripture *and* a popular theological book that teaches the doctrines of their denomination.

They're not re-evaluating *everything*. They're not starting from the ground up. They're not asking *all* the questions they should be asking. They still trust their doctrines. They still trust their denomination. They want to change Church structure – but they don't want to change their beliefs.

These people are asking why we have our meetings a certain way, but they're missing the big picture: In the early Church, Christianity wasn't about meetings. In the early Church, Christianity was a lifestyle. It was a culture. It was an alternative society. It was its own kingdom. In the early Church, Christianity completely redefined and consumed your life.

If we start meeting in homes, but our lives aren't redefined, then it still isn't the same Christianity that existed in the first century.

We cannot merely try to change Church structure and functions while still holding to the doctrine and theology we received from the “institutional Church.” We must also re-evaluate the most important component: The early Church was defined by their beliefs – not by any kind of structure. In other words, they *did* what they did because they *believed* what they believed. Their meetings didn't look a certain way just because they arbitrarily decided to structure it that way. Their meetings looked a certain way because what they were doing was directly correlated to what they believed.

So, to understand what we should be doing, we need to understand *why* we're doing it. We need to make sure we believe the right things. We need to question the theology. We need to question the doctrines. We need to question the teaching we've received.

If you only question what we do and how we do it, but you don't question the theology behind it, then you're not addressing the real problem.

Furthermore, if you only address the structure, then there will inevitably be a lot of people who see it and say, “Well that's really cool that you do that, but I do things a different way.”

This is one of the most common responses among people who don't want to change the status-quo. They respond, “You have your way; I have my

way.” But this isn’t biblical. The early Christians in the first Church did things a certain way for a reason. Their Church structure was what it was because of their beliefs. The way they did Church was directly influenced by what they believed. It wasn’t something that some people could accept, and others could just find a different way of doing things.

The way the first Christians did Church was fundamentally different than the way modern Christians do Church. This was because their idea of what it means to be a Christian was fundamentally different than the modern idea of what it means to be a Christian.

It’s not enough to just change the traditions, rituals, and structure. The theology needs to be addressed, too.

So, the first question we must address is this:

Why is it important that Christians re-evaluate the theology and doctrines they believe?

To answer this question, we must look at what Scripture tells us. We must look at the warnings found in Scripture and evaluate our beliefs and lifestyle in light of those warnings.

Remember what we saw in the first chapter – Israel was warned by Moses that they would fall away. They were warned that they would become completely evil. They were warned that their actions would bring about their own destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, despite those warnings, they fell away and thought they hadn’t fallen away. They became evil, but still thought they were holy. They chose the road to destruction, but they still thought they were on the road to life. Despite believing the words of Moses were true, they lived as if they thought the warnings from Moses were false. They didn’t take his warnings to heart. They didn’t re-evaluate their own lives in light of his warnings. No one paused and thought, “if Moses’ warnings are true, then something must be wrong about what we’re doing – because he said we would be evil.” No one stopped. No one second-guessed what they were doing. No one let his words really sink in.

They measured themselves by their own perspective. They didn’t look at their lives from God’s perspective, and they didn’t use Scripture alone as their standard.

Furthermore, the Old Testament Israelites are not our only examples. During the time of Jesus, the people of Israel had made the same mistake yet again.

We tend to read the gospel accounts without recognizing the perspective of the people who lived at that time. We read the words of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Leviticus 26:14-46; Deuteronomy 4:25-31, 28:15-68, 29:16-29, 30:1, 31:15-29, 32:15-18, 32:21-43

## DEAD CHURCH

We read the descriptions of the apostles. We read their stories from their perspective, and we forget that their perspective wasn't everyone's perspective.

For example, we read about the Pharisees and think, "Man, those guys were awful. They were stuck up, they were arrogant, they were hateful, they were hypocrites, and they were murderers." In our minds, we associate the Pharisees with negative things. But that wasn't the perspective of the people at that time.

At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were considered the godliest men alive. They were the people who tried the hardest to obey God. They were the ones who cared the most about God. They were the equivalent of today's pastors, preachers, Sunday-school teachers, and small group leaders. The perspective of the people was that the Pharisees were examples of what it meant to obey God. They believed the Pharisees were righteous. They believed the Pharisees served God.

Why is all this important?

It is important because it demonstrates how easy it is for an entire culture to think they're serving God when they're not. It provides an example for us of what it will look like when the Church falls away.

Their example is important today because Christians do the same thing the Israelites and the Pharisees did. Christians, often without realizing it, evaluate themselves by comparing themselves to their Christian culture. In other words, they decide what a Christian life should look like by looking at all the Christians around them. So, when they assimilate and begin to live like everyone else around them, they become convinced that they're pleasing God.

Paul wrote about Christians who did this. He said, "They use themselves to measure themselves, and they judge themselves by what they themselves are. What fools!"<sup>1</sup>

If you evaluate yourself against yourself, you're being a fool. When you evaluate yourself against your own culture, you're doing the same thing – you're measuring yourself by yourself. You make yourself, your culture, and your friends the standard you're trying to live up to – instead of the Bible. You make the modern Christian culture your standard – instead of what Jesus taught.

Paul also said, "If anyone thinks he is something when he really is not, he is only deceiving himself. Each person should examine his own actions and not compare himself with others."<sup>2</sup>

If you think you're a Christian, when really you're not, you are

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:12

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 6:3-4

deceiving yourself. If you think you're alive, when really you're dead, you are deceived. So, you shouldn't compare yourself with others. If you conclude that you are alive and saved because you compared yourself to the Christian culture around you, you might be deceived! You might be doing the same thing the Israelites and the Pharisees did! If you are living up to the standard of the modern Church, you might still not be living up to God's standard! You cannot compare yourself to those around you! You cannot look at Christianity today and assume that you have life with Jesus just because you're living up to the standard of modern Christianity.

Most Christians know this, yet most Christians do it anyway without realizing it. They think they're comparing themselves to the Bible, but they're reading their own culture and their own beliefs into the text.

For example, a Christian might say, "I don't believe that any Christian is ever going to stop sinning." Yet the Bible clearly says that everyone who knows Christ does not go on sinning, and anyone who does go on sinning is a child of the devil – not a child of God.<sup>1</sup> And Paul said that you can only have life if you put sin completely to death.<sup>2</sup>

But instead of looking at the Bible, Christians look at themselves and say, "I'm a Christian, and I keep sinning, and everyone around me is a Christian, and they keep sinning... therefore, Christians will always keep on sinning." They use themselves and those around them as their standard instead of the Bible, and they never once stop to consider, "What if I'm not actually a Christian? What if all the warnings in the Bible about Christians being deceived and led into destruction were talking about me and those around me? Maybe the Bible's description of a Christian is more accurate than my own."

Christians read the Bible, and think they're following the Bible, but they fail to recognize that it describes a Christian life that is radically different than anything currently happening in mainstream Christianity. Instead of changing their lifestyle to match Scripture, they change their lifestyle to match the lives of so-called "Christians" around them. Furthermore, they're willing to live a lifestyle that is radically different than what they see in Scripture because they accept a gospel and salvation process that is radically different than what is found in Scripture. Their lifestyle is shaped by what they believe. Their beliefs tell them that it is acceptable to live a life contrary to the examples set in Scripture. Their beliefs tell them that the Christian culture around them is just as acceptable to God as the culture of the first Church in the New Testament.

The Israelites thought they were righteous before God because their

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:4-10, 5:18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 8:12-13

lifestyles matched their beliefs about God. The Pharisees thought they were justified before God because their actions lined up with their own beliefs. And Christians today decide whether or not they are living according to Scripture by comparing their lives to what they believe Scripture teaches. They use their doctrines and theology to justify themselves. As long as they believe their lives are in line with Scripture, they have no real reason to change.

Once again, our beliefs shape what we do. The early Church did what they did because they believed what they believed. The Church today does what it does because they believe what they believe.

But what if the beliefs of the Church today are wrong? What if the Church today believes the wrong thing, and as a result, lives the wrong way? What if the Church today is just as wrong as the Pharisees were? What if the Church today is just as wrong as Ancient Israel? What would the implications be? What would that mean for you when you stand before God on judgment day?

We cannot blindly choose to conform to the standard Christian culture. We cannot determine what our lives should look like by using Christians around us as our examples. We cannot blindly accept what the Church teaches, and we cannot blindly accept how Christians live.

Why?

Because just like Moses warned Israel about their coming apostasy, Jesus and the apostles warned us that the same thing would happen. They warned us about false teachers, false brothers, and false prophets. They warned us to not follow men. They warned us to not allow ourselves to be deceived.

Scripture warned us that apostasy was coming. It warned us, just like Moses warned the Israelites, that many would fall away and be deceived. The apostasy of Ancient Israel and the Pharisees is a picture of what it will look like when the Church commits apostasy as well. When the Church is in apostasy, everyone in the Church will still think they're serving God. Everyone will still sing songs to God. Everyone will still pray to God. Everyone will still read Scripture. Everyone will still call Jesus, "Lord."<sup>1</sup> They will hold certain beliefs about Scripture which will justify their actions. They will hold to certain teachings, doctrines, and theologies which will give them a false assurance before God. Their beliefs will shape what they do – but their beliefs will be just as wrong as the Ancient Israelites and the Pharisees.

If we want to avoid being included in that apostasy, we must do what the Israelites failed to do: We must take the warnings in Scripture seriously. We must take the warnings to heart and recognize that those warnings were given to us for a reason. We can't just ignore them, and we can't just assume

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

that our ideas about Christianity are the correct ideas. We can't assume that we have everything figured out.

God told us about the apostasy ahead of time, and he told us how to avoid it.

Jesus said, "Be careful of false prophets. They come to you disguised like sheep, but underneath they are ferocious wolves. You will know these people by their fruit."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus also said, "Many false prophets will arise and deceive many."<sup>2</sup>

In these passages, Jesus warned us about false prophets. As we mentioned in the first chapter, this warning would have immediately resonated with his original audience. The Jewish people would have immediately thought of all the false prophets in the Old Testament who had deceived the Jewish people and led them away from God. The prophets in Ancient Israel were more than just people who predicted the future – the prophets were those who told the people what God wanted – they explained the Scriptures, they were teachers, they helped the people know what was right and what was wrong.

The false prophets were men who stepped into this role, but taught the wrong things. They didn't tell the people to turn from their sin. They told the people God loved them. They told the people God would bless them. They told the people to keep doing what they were doing. They used Scripture to lead the people away from God – but they had the people convinced that they were leading them closer to God.

Jesus was warning us that this would happen again. He was warning those who followed him that false prophets would once again rise up – this time, in the Church. He was warning us to not be deceived – to not be like the Ancient Israelites who blindly followed their teachers. He was warning us that many people would come who would claim to be teaching Scripture, speaking for God, and leading us closer to God – but that they would actually be leading people astray. He was warning us that we need to pay attention – we need to make sure that we're believing what is true, and as a result, doing what God actually wants. He was warning us that, once again, false prophets would begin telling people that God loves them, that God would bless them, and that they should keep doing what they're already doing. Instead of preaching repentance (as all the true prophets did), they would teach "Christians" that God favors them, even though they continue doing what God hates.

Peter wrote a similar warning:

"There used to be false prophets among God's people just as you will have some false teachers among you. They will introduce destructive heresies.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:15-16

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 24:11



They will even deny the Master who bought them. So they will bring quick destruction on themselves. Many will follow their evil ways and slander the way of truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter was saying the same thing Jesus said: The same thing that happened to Israel in the Old Testament will happen again to the Church. The Church will have false teachers telling people they’re okay, teaching something that is not the truth. The Church will have false teachers giving us the wrong beliefs, the wrong doctrine, and the wrong theology. By convincing us of the wrong beliefs, they would also convince us that we’re serving God when we’re actually rejecting the commands of God for the sake of our own traditions.<sup>2</sup> The Church will have false teachers telling us that we’re pleasing God, when really God hates what we’re doing. The story of Israel’s apostasy in the Old Testament is exactly what we should expect to see in the Church.

Jesus also said, “Woe to you when everyone speaks well about you, because their ancestors did the same things to the false prophets.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, people only speak well about false teachers and false prophets. They like to listen to the people who tell them what they want to hear. Jesus was warning that this would continue through the Church age: the majority of people will follow false teachers and speak well of false teachers. Those who truly follow Jesus won’t be popular. They won’t be loved by the masses. If you are a Christian teacher and virtually everyone speaks well about you, you’re in trouble. That’s how people treat false prophets. People don’t treat real prophets that way. Furthermore, if you’re following a teacher who is well-loved, you are also in trouble. Only false-prophets are well-loved. And we were warned that those who follow them will be led to destruction.

Just like Israel had false prophets among them, so too, the Church will be full of false prophets. Those false prophets will teach from Scripture, they will teach doctrine and theology. They will convince the masses to believe the wrong information, and that wrong information would convince the people that they are right with God – when they’re not. Those false beliefs, false doctrines, and false theologies would be the foundation for their deception. As a result of believing the wrong information, the people would live wrong. They would disobey God and fall into apostasy – all while thinking they’re doing what is right and pleasing God with their lives.

The false teaching, false doctrine, and false theology would result in Christians having the wrong beliefs. Those wrong beliefs would shape what they would do.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 2:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3,6

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:26

Paul also warned us that false teachers would come: "...the time will come when people will not listen to the true teaching but will find many more teachers who please them by saying the things they want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and will begin to follow false stories."<sup>1</sup>

Once again, the apostles warned us that the time would come when Christians would follow false teachers – they would follow teachers who teach the things they want to hear. They would turn from the truth. They would follow lies.

This warning is found repeatedly throughout the New Testament. Paul also said, "I know that after I am gone, some people will come like wild wolves and will not spare the flock. Even some from your own group will rise up and twist the truth and will lead away followers after them. So be careful!"<sup>2</sup>

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Now the Spirit clearly says that in the later times some people will abandon the faith. They will devote themselves to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons. Such teachings come from the false words of liars whose consciences are branded as if by a hot iron."<sup>3</sup>

The warning of Jesus and the apostles was clear and abundant: False teachers and false prophets would come. They would teach lies as truth, and many would be deceived by them. They would lead people to destruction just as the false prophets led the Israelites to destruction. They would convince Christians to believe the wrong information – and that incorrect information would result in Christians living the wrong way, doing the wrong things. It would result in apostasy. It would result in rebellion. Just like Israel and just like the Pharisees, Christians would think they were serving God, but they would be deceived. They would believe lies, and it would result in their destruction.

Shortly after many of the apostles were killed, Jude summarized their warning:

"Dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ prophesied. They said to you, 'In the last times there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly desires.' These are the people who divide you, people whose thoughts are only of this world, who do not have the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

This summary in Jude came at the conclusion of a long description of false brothers and false teachers. Jude wrote an entire letter to address the fact that false teachers would lead people astray, and in this verse, he reminded his audience that this was the same warning that all the apostles had prophesied.

These verses are just a few examples. Jesus and the apostles repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:29-31

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 4:1-2

<sup>4</sup> Jude 17-19

warned us that false teachers would come. They warned us to not be deceived. They warned us that many people would follow them, and they warned us that it would result in destruction.

Jesus said, “Enter through the narrow gate. The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and many people enter through that gate. But the gate is small and the road is difficult that leads to true life. Only a few people find that road.”<sup>1</sup>

Think about the comparison.

Jesus said that only a few people will enter life, but he also said that false prophets would come and deceive many.<sup>2</sup> Peter also said that many would be deceived and led into destruction.<sup>3</sup>

Only a few will enter life. And many will be deceived.

We need to compare those two statements and realize that if many are deceived and only a few enter life, then we cannot look at the majority of Christianity and follow their lead. We cannot blindly accept their beliefs and their lifestyle. The majority will go to destruction. The majority will be deceived – they will believe the wrong things, and as a result, they will live the wrong way. Only the minority will find life.

Scripture warned us that false teachers would come. They would teach things that are a lie, and many would be deceived. If you follow them, you will end up in destruction.

Many people will be deceived by false teachers and false teaching.

Few people will find life.

If many are going to be deceived by false teaching, then we need to make sure we’re not among them.

Scripture warns us that false teachers and false believers will be everywhere. It will be just like the false prophets in ancient Israel. And, many – the majority – will be deceived by them.

We were warned. We were told ahead of time what to expect. We were told false teachers would come. We were told false brothers would come. Just like Moses warned Israel, Jesus and the apostles warned us. This is our reality. Either these warnings are true today, or the Bible is a lie and Jesus was a liar. Either these false teachers are leading countless people to destruction today, or nothing about the Bible is true.

Christians must begin to accept this reality and take this warning to heart, because accepting this reality would drastically change how Christians interact with all the books, sermons, conferences, blogs, videos, music,

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 24:11

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 2:1-2

doctrines, and theologies that circulate the world today.

We were warned about the time we live in. We were warned that false teachers would come. We were warned that many would be deceived.

This is why it is important for Christians to re-evaluate more than just the structure and rituals of Church. Christians must begin questioning everything – including their doctrine, their theology, their beliefs, and their own salvation. Scripture warned us that the Church would fall away. Scripture warned us that false teachers would lead many astray. Christians must begin to stop and say, “If this is true, then something *must* be wrong about Christianity today – because Jesus and the apostles prophesied that the Church would fall away and begin to believe lies. If something *isn't* wrong about Christianity today, then Jesus and the apostles were false prophets.” If Christians really believed the Bible is true, they would believe this warning is true as well. If Christians really believed the Bible is true, they would stop being confident in their own beliefs and the doctrines of their preferred denomination.

Either Scripture is right, and the majority of teachers in the world today are teaching lies, or Scripture is wrong, in which case it shouldn't be trusted about anything. Either Scripture is right, and the majority of Christians in the world today are deceived by false teaching, or Scripture is wrong, in which case, *every* Christian in the world today is deceived by false teaching.

If we believe the Bible can be trusted, then we need to come to terms with what it tells us. If we believe the Bible can be trusted, then we need to start trusting what it tells us about our current reality.

The Bible tells us that we live in a time when false teachers are everywhere, and the majority of Christians are deceived. The Bible tells us that false prophets are disguised like Christians, leading people to destruction by teaching people the wrong things about God and the wrong things about how to be saved.

Do you believe the Bible? Or do you believe the modern Church?

Do you read Scripture, and Scripture alone? Or do you also read a theology book? Do you get your understanding from the teachers in your denomination? Or do you rely solely on Scripture?

Do you take these warnings seriously? Are you willing to consider the possibility that all the teachers you're familiar with are wrong, and most of the Christians you know are deceived? Are you willing to accept the reality given to you by the Bible?

Either this warning is true, and God's perspective of the modern Church is completely different than our own perspective – or the Bible is wrong, which means we can't trust anything in it at all.

## **Identifying the Truth**

Most Christians think they know how to evaluate the truth and identify false teachers. They're aware of these warnings, but they think they already know how to respond. They think these warnings are about certain other teachers. They think the warnings refer to some other denomination or other Christian sects. They judge what is true by comparing it to what they already believe.

But they believe what they were taught... by men.

Christians today often make the mistake of thinking that they would be able to recognize false teaching if they saw it. They don't comprehend what it means to be *deceived*. They think they already know the truth. They never question whether or not they already are deceived. They evaluate everything according to the doctrines of their own denomination. They evaluate everything according to the theology they've received from men. They evaluate everything against what they already believe.

What's worse – they think they're evaluating everything against Scripture. But they're convinced Scripture says what they were told it says. They've been trained to read Scripture a certain way – trained to see certain doctrines and theologies where they don't exist. They're convinced they know Scripture, but they really only know what they've been told Scripture says.

Like the Pharisees and Ancient Israel, most Christians today refuse to even consider the possibility that everything they currently believe is a lie. They're convinced they know the Bible. They're convinced they know what Scripture teaches. They're convinced they know the truth. They're convinced they believe what they believe because it's what the Bible says. And they're blind to the fact that they believe what they believe because it's what men have said.

I don't ask you to take me at my word. I don't ask you to just blindly believe what I say. All I ask is that you recognize the warnings in Scripture and consider their implications. If Scripture warned you that false teachers will come and many will be deceived, why are you so confident that you're not one of them? The Israelites were confident, too. The Pharisees were extremely confident. They all had Scripture. They all read it every day. They were all convinced that Scripture taught what they believed – just like most Christians today.

Are you willing to consider the possibility that perhaps you have things wrong? Are you willing to consider the possibility that what you believe is not what the Bible actually says? Your life is on the line. You were warned that this would be something to watch for. To ignore this and hold to your beliefs without questioning them is arrogance – it is arrogantly believing that you're already right, and you've got everything figured out. Like the Pharisees, it's

hard-heartedness and a stiff neck. It's refusing to re-evaluate yourself. It's refusing to consider God's warnings and take them seriously.

Why would you assume that you already know the correct information when God explicitly warned you many times that false teachers would fill the Church, teach lies, and many would be deceived – resulting in their destruction? Why wouldn't that cause you to stop and re-evaluate things? That's exactly what Israel failed to do in the Old Testament. They had the warnings in Scripture. They had the warnings of Moses. But they failed to ever stop and re-evaluate. They didn't take his warnings seriously. They just kept doing what they were already doing.

Many Christians also make the mistake of thinking that if a teacher reads the Bible and quotes the Bible, then they are teaching what the Bible says. They learn the theology and doctrines of their denomination, they look at all the Bible verses that are used to back up those ideas, and they become convinced that the Bible teaches what they were taught.

I've heard many Christians talk about how they want to be part of a Church that preaches the Bible. They want to be somewhere where the Word of God is read every Sunday. They seem to think that if they hear Scripture read, then they're hearing the truth. But that's not necessarily true. False teachers use Scripture, too. We were warned that they would twist Scripture. Peter warned us, "Some things in Paul's letters are hard to understand, and people who are ignorant and unstable twist them. They also twist the other Scriptures, which will lead to their destruction."<sup>1</sup>

False teachers will read the Bible. They will teach from the Bible. Many Christians will go to churches that read the Bible and preach from God's Word. But they will hear lies. Those men will twist Scripture. They will make it say something it doesn't say. They will convince their audience to believe the Bible teaches something it doesn't teach. They will use Scripture to lead people to destruction.

During the apostasy of Ancient Israel in the Old Testament, God said, "You keep saying, 'We are wise, because we have the teachings of the LORD.' But actually, those who explain the Scriptures have written lies with their pens. These wise teachers rejected the word of the LORD, so what wisdom is in them? They will be humiliated. They will be shocked and trapped."<sup>2</sup>

Like many Christians today, the Israelites also thought they were wise because they had the teachings of the Lord. They thought their teachers were teaching the truth because their teachers quoted a lot of Scripture. But they

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 3:16

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 8:8-9

were believing the explanations and doctrines of men. They thought they were hearing Scripture, but they were really hearing the words of men who claimed to explain Scripture. They were believing the words of men who taught lies, and used Scripture to back up their lies. Jesus and Peter said that the false teachers in the Church would be just like the false prophets in Ancient Israel. The false prophets in Ancient Israel used Scripture. They taught Scripture. They read Scripture. They quoted Scripture.

Just because someone quotes the Bible, reads the Bible, and references the Bible doesn't mean they're teaching the truth! Just because you go to a Church that reads the Bible doesn't mean they're leading you toward life! False teachers will quote the Bible! Even Satan quoted Scripture when he tempted Jesus!<sup>1</sup>

Many Christians choose their Church based on how much Scripture is read – but they end up being indoctrinated with the false teachings of men. They think they can back everything up with Scripture, but they only learn to read Scripture through the lens of what they were taught. They learn to see certain doctrine and theology in Scripture that isn't actually there! They learn to see a gospel message in Scripture that none of the apostles actually taught!

The New Testament repeatedly warned us about false teachers, false brothers, and false prophets. It is easily the biggest warning in the New Testament – a huge warning that most Christians don't really pay attention to. They think they pay attention to it, but all they really do is pick their favorite teachers and follow them. They pick the denomination and doctrines they like best, and they follow those teachers. They think they can evaluate the truth, but they can only evaluate whether or not something lines up with what they have been taught. Their standard of measurement is their denomination, with its doctrines, theologies, and teachers.

This is how Christians become deceived without knowing they're deceived. They think they know the truth. They think they know the Bible. They think they know how to evaluate what is real. But they're no different than the Pharisees. They're no different than the Israelites.

Paul warned the Corinthians that they should not blindly accept what they were being taught – even if people taught about Jesus and preached “the gospel.” He said, “You gladly tolerate anyone who comes to you and preaches a different Jesus from the one we preached. You are very willing to accept a spirit that is different from the Spirit you received, or a gospel that is different from the one you received from us.”<sup>2</sup>

His warning was clear: Not everyone who preaches about Jesus is

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:5-6; Luke 4:9-11

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:4

preaching the true Jesus. Not everyone who receives a spirit is receiving the Spirit of God. Not every gospel message is the true gospel message. In other words, some teachers might teach about Jesus, claim to preach the gospel, and pray for you to receive the Spirit, but that doesn't mean you should accept them. That doesn't make them true Christians. That doesn't prove that they're real. They might be preaching a false Jesus: They might use his name, but that doesn't mean they're teaching you anything about who he actually is or what he requires. They might be preaching a gospel that is completely different than the one preached in Scripture: They teach about the cross, and they teach about forgiveness, but maybe they're leaving out the most important aspects, and maybe they're telling you that you gain salvation through a means other than what Scripture truly says. And if you follow them, you might receive a different spirit than the true Spirit of God: You will have an experience, receive a real spirit, and maybe even see signs and wonders, but you won't have God's Spirit – you'll receive an evil spirit who deceives you.

Think about the implications of this warning. Imagine you were one of those people. Would you know that you were deceived? You would believe in Jesus, believe in the gospel, and receive a spirit. You would be fully convinced that you were a Christian. You would be confident in your salvation. Like the Israelites who persecuted the prophets, you would passionately stand up for what you thought was the truth. But you would believe in the wrong Jesus. You would trust the wrong gospel. And you would have an evil spirit.

What if that is who you currently are? What if you're believing in the wrong Jesus? What if you're trusting a man-made gospel? What if you received a false spirit?

How would you know?

False believers will be in our midst. They will disguise themselves as Christians – they will disguise themselves as sheep – but they will be wolves. They will pretend to be (and even think they are) servants of Jesus, but through their actions, they will serve the enemy.

Paul warned us about these people, saying, “Such men are not true apostles but are workers who lie. They change themselves to look like apostles of Christ. This does not surprise us. Even Satan changes himself to look like an angel of light. So it does not surprise us if Satan's servants also make themselves look like servants who work for what is right. But in the end they will be punished for what they do.”<sup>1</sup>

Here is what many Christians fail to understand: Just because someone talks about God doesn't mean that person loves God. Just because someone reads the Bible and teaches from the Bible doesn't mean they're teaching what

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:13-15



the Bible teaches. Just because someone preaches the name of Jesus doesn't mean they're preaching the truth about Jesus. Just because people claim to be Christians doesn't mean they are Christians.

We were warned. We were told false prophets would come. We were told false teachers would come. We were told they would be wolves in sheep's clothing. We were told they would disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. We were told they would change their appearance so they look like servants of Christ.

Their appearance means nothing! Even Satan himself can appear as an angel of light – so it shouldn't surprise us if his servants make themselves look like servants of Jesus!

You cannot determine what is true by outward appearance. You cannot trust men just because they call themselves Christians, preach the name of Jesus, say they love God, and teach something that can be backed up with Scripture.

You also shouldn't trust a teacher just because you become convinced that that person truly does love God and cares about Jesus. Maybe they do! That's not the measuring-stick we were given.

Christians today seem to think that Satan's servants will all know that they are servants of Satan. Therefore, they defend the teachers they love because they've decided that those teachers care about God, and they believe that everyone who cares about God is a true Christian. Christians today act as if everything will be perfectly obvious. They miss the entire concept of what it means to be *deceived*.

Jesus said, "Can a blind person lead another blind person? No! Both of them will fall into a pit. A student is not better than the teacher, but the student who is fully trained will be like the teacher."<sup>1</sup>

Satan's servants don't have to know they're his servants! They might be blind! If they're blind, that means they can't see – they don't know who they are or who they're serving. Jesus was talking about the Pharisees. The Pharisees thought they loved God! They thought they were serving God! They thought they were God's chosen leaders! They did not at all think they were servants of Satan.

This is what is happening in the Church. We have the blind teaching the blind teaching the blind. The blind teachers don't know that they're servants of Satan. But, you don't have to know you're a servant of Satan in order to be a servant of Satan. Jesus also said, "Whoever is not with me is against me. Whoever does not gather with me scatters."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:39-40

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 12:30

You don't have to know that you're against Jesus to be against him; if you are not teaching the right thing, you are a servant of Satan – you're doing his work, even if you truly think and believe that you're working for the Lord. If you're furthering a false gospel, teaching the wrong information, or in any other way furthering the work of the enemy, then you're serving the enemy – whether you know it or not. Many false teachers will think they love God. They will have an appearance of godliness.<sup>1</sup> Their followers will defend them because they're convinced that they love God and serve God. But they're blind – they think they're serving God, but they're actually serving his enemy.

You must learn to use the measuring-stick given to us by God. You cannot make up your own standards and measure teachers by your own standards. Their appearance is nothing. We weren't told to evaluate them by what they appear to care about, or if they appear to love God. Blind teachers will think they love God. They will appear to be passionate about him. They will appear to be Christians. They themselves will be convinced that they're Christians. But they're blind.

My heart breaks for people who are blind, but I'm not going to follow them. We cannot continue filling our heads with their useless "knowledge."<sup>2</sup> We cannot continue allowing them to indoctrinate us with their false theologies, beliefs, and doctrines. We cannot choose to listen to them just because they genuinely think they're serving God. If you follow someone who is deceived just because you think they have good intentions, you will follow that person into the pit. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions!

A blind guide will lead a blind follower into a pit. The implication is that the guide is blind – they don't realize they're serving Satan any more than their students do! But this doesn't make them any less his servants. Their students don't grow up to be like Jesus. Their students grow up to be as blind as they are.

That last part of what Jesus said – a student becoming like the teacher – is something many Christians reference. They say, "The student will become like the teacher! That means we can become like Jesus!"

And, that's absolutely true!

But who is your teacher?

In this verse, Jesus wasn't talking about himself as the Teacher (although he did use this same statement in other places to refer to himself and his disciples). Here, Jesus said "a student will become like the teacher" right after saying, "Can a blind person lead a blind person?" In other words, he was saying that if your teacher is a blind person, then at best you will become like

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 6:20-21

your teacher and you will also be blind. You will not begin to see; you will stay blind. What's worse – like the Pharisees, you will begin to think that you can see, when you're still blind, and you might go and begin to teach others!<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said about the Pharisees, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You travel across land and sea to make one convert. When you make that convert, you make him twice the son of hell that you are.”<sup>2</sup>

If you follow a blind teacher, become blind, and begin to preach “the gospel” to people, but you don't preach the right thing, you are making converts who are more fit for hell than yourself. That is what Jesus said to the Pharisees, and that is the same thing happening in the Church today. Blind people are following blind people. Both will end up in the pit. You are not serving God if the gospel you're evangelizing is a false gospel! You need to make sure that what you're following is actually the truth, and that it's from Scripture. You need to stop following men. If those men are blind, you will never arrive at the truth – even if you think you did. If those men are blind, you yourself will become a servant of Satan as you begin to evangelize and further a false gospel instead of the truth.

A student will become like his teacher. But if your teacher is not Jesus, then you will not become like Jesus.

You are not called to be a disciple of the Pope, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Wesley or anyone else. You are not called to be a disciple of your pastor, favorite preacher, favorite author, or favorite worship leader. You are called to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. If you want to become like Jesus, you need to be *his* student. A student will become like the teacher – that's what Jesus said.<sup>3</sup> But if your teacher is blind, then you will become like your blind teacher. You will not become like Jesus if he is not your Teacher.

Christians must begin to recognize this reality. They must begin to take this seriously. They must stop being so naïve! If you do not want to be deceived and led to destruction, you must take these warnings to heart. False teachers will deceive many. They will look like Christians, they will talk like Christians, they will read the Bible, quote the Bible, and teach from the Bible. They will appear to be servants of the light – but they will be the servants of Satan. If you follow them, you will also become a servant of Satan – whether you know it or not.

If you continue following them and listening to them, you won't even know how to distinguish between what is true and what is not. You will see things in the Bible that aren't really there. They will twist Scripture and

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Luke 11:52; John 9:40-41

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:15

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:25

convince you it says things it doesn't really say. They will use Scripture to lead you into the pit.

### **Christian Pharisees**

Christianity has ignored the warnings in Scripture. Christians haven't taken these warnings to heart. They trust their teachers. They trust their pastors. They trust their leaders. They trust their denominations. They read their books. They listen to their sermons. They read their blogs and watch their videos.

Christians study the Bible in one hand, but they hold a theology book or a commentary in the other hand. They read Scripture, but they use the teaching of men to explain Scripture to them. Very few Christians read Scripture and Scripture alone. They find Scripture too hard to understand by itself (because they're convinced that it teaches a doctrine it doesn't actually teach), so they turn to a commentary, a study Bible, a sermon, a devotional, or some other form of human teaching to have someone explain Scripture to them.

Do you know what Christians are doing when they do that? Do you know the historical example they are following?

They're doing the exact same thing as the Pharisees!

The Pharisees had the Old Testament, but instead of just reading the Old Testament, they also read the writings of the rabbis (*rabbi* just means *teacher*). They used the teachings of the rabbis in order to understand Scripture – exactly like Christians do today! They had countless books and oral traditions to explain the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets. They used the teaching of men to understand Scripture. And, as a result, they actually did the opposite of what God had told them to do in Scripture!

Jesus said to the Pharisees, “And why do you violate God’s command for the sake of your traditions? God said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.’ But you say a person can tell his father or mother, ‘I have something I could use to help you, but I have given it to God already.’ You teach that person not to honor his father or his mother. You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: “These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The doctrines they teach are nothing but human rules.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees had their own writings and their own traditions, which

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:3-9

they thought helped them understand the Bible. They thought their writings explained Scripture so they could follow it better. But Jesus said they were rejecting the word of God for the sake of their traditions. They were doing what men said – not what God said! They thought they needed someone to explain the Bible to them, so they turned to all their other books and traditions. But, in doing so, they stopped doing what Scripture directly taught. They rejected what God said, and they only did what men told them God had said.

Furthermore, as we saw earlier, this is also exactly what the Israelites did in the Old Testament when they were deceived by the false prophets. God said to them, “You keep saying, ‘We are wise, because we have the teachings of the Lord.’ But actually, those who explain the Scriptures have written lies with their pens. These wise teachers rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom is in them? They will be humiliated. They will be shocked and trapped.”<sup>1</sup>

The Israelites thought they had wisdom because they had God’s word. They thought they understood what God wanted, and how he wanted them to live. But, instead of following Scripture – and Scripture alone – they turned to men to explain Scripture to them, and those men got it wrong. Those men were writing lies with their pens. They were false teachers.

The Israelites fell away from God when they started following teachers instead of Scripture. The Pharisees made the exact same mistake, following their own rabbis instead of Scripture. And, the New Testament warned us that the Church would make the same mistake yet again – reading and following teachers rather than Scripture, and Scripture alone.

Look at the Church today, and evaluate for yourself if this prophesy is fulfilled:

Today, we have Bibles with more commentary in them than actual Bible! We call them *study bibles*, and Christians use them to understand the Bible. Christians think they’re studying Scripture when they read the Bible and use a commentary to explain the Bible to them. Or, they read the Bible and then listen to a sermon to explain what the Bible really means. Or, they read the Bible and then read some devotional that makes them feel good about what they read in the Bible. Or, they go to church and listen to an hour-long sermon that included ten sentences of Scripture – and they think the Word of God was preached!

Christians think they’re wise because they have the teachings of the Lord! But they’re getting all their “knowledge” from the pens of men who are claiming to explain Scripture!

What are you doing?

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 8:8-9

You are doing the same thing the Pharisees did! You are doing exactly what apostate Israel did! You think you're wise because you have the teachings of the Lord, but actually you're only reading the lies written by those who claim to be explaining Scripture. The apostles all warned you that the Church would be full of false teachers and false teaching – just like ancient Israel. But you're ignoring their warnings and turning to those teachers to explain Scripture to you anyway.

Christians have become Pharisees – following the wisdom of men instead of the wisdom of the Spirit. They fill their minds with Christian “rabbinical” writings. They learn doctrines, theology, human ideas, and man-made traditions, and they convince themselves that these ideas come from Scripture!

The Church has followed the same path taken by the Pharisees and Ancient Israel. The same ingredient that resulted in apostasy in the past was predicted to be found within the Church. As we can see, that ingredient is thriving in Christianity today. What does that tell us about the Church? What does that tell us about the apostasy that was predicted to come as a result?

The Israelites and the Pharisees are our example of what apostasy looks like. Shouldn't it scare us that we look just like them?

How have we allowed this to happen? With all the warnings in Scripture, how have we managed to let teachers take control? Despite all the warnings of Moses, the Israelites followed their false teachers to their own destruction. How has the Church done the same thing, even though we had more warnings than they did?

We have allowed this to happen because teachers have taught us that we need teachers. They tell us we need to rely on them to explain the Bible to us. They tell us that we can't understand the Bible without an expert or a scholar explaining the complex theology to us. Teachers tell us all the things that make us dependent on them! Meanwhile, they rely on their education, their worldly wisdom, and their own intellect.

But Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the people who are wise and learned. But you have revealed them to those who are like little children. Yes, Father, this is what you really wanted.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said the truth about the kingdom is purposefully hidden (by God!) from the smart, the intellectuals, and from the educated.

Think about that. God himself is hiding the truth from them. If God is hiding the truth from them, what hope do they have of ever finding the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:21

truth? And, if they are utterly incapable of finding the truth, then why are Christians so quick to believe that we need those educated men to explain the truth to us? Those educated men don't know the truth in the first place! They just *think* they do! They rely on their intelligence and education. They think their scholarly work allows them to find the truth, and equips them to teach other people. But it doesn't.

Christians have become Pharisees. The Pharisees were the educated scholars of their day. The scribes and Pharisees were the ones who "went to seminary" in a manner of speaking. They studied Scripture and told others what Scripture taught. Instead of following Scripture and Scripture alone, the people listened to the Pharisees. They trusted them. They believed what they taught. But the Pharisees were blind. The truth was hidden from them.

God hides the truth from those who search for the truth using worldly wisdom and education. He cannot be found through seminary, Bible colleges, higher education, or formal training. He hates the idea that people think they need formal training in order to know him.

Paul wrote, "It is written in the Scriptures, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; and I will reject the intelligence of the intelligent.' Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where is the orator of this world? God has made the wisdom of the world foolish. God wisely determined that the world would not know God through its own wisdom. So God was pleased to use the message that sounds foolish to save those who believe... Brothers and sisters, look at what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise in the way the world judges wisdom. Not many of you had great influence. Not many of you came from important families. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in his presence. Because of God you are united with Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God."<sup>1</sup>

The wisdom of the world is foolish. God doesn't use the education of this world. He doesn't rely on scholars and seminaries. He determined, just as Jesus said, that people would not know him through the wisdom and education of this world. God uses what people think is unimportant. God uses what people look down on.

Education, formal training, seminary classes, and scholarly work play no role whatsoever in whether someone will know the truth. If we want to learn the truth, we must stop turning to men who are incapable of knowing

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:19-21, 26-30

the truth. We must begin to do what Jesus said – we must make ourselves like little children. If we make ourselves like little children, God himself will reveal the truth to us.

But instead of learning from God, Christians have become convinced that they need to learn from men. Educated men convinced everyone else that they know what they're talking about, and that everyone should follow them. They convinced people that we need them or we won't understand the Bible. They convinced people that we need to follow their methods of reading the Bible to understand it (it's called *hermeneutics*).

The blind teachers have convinced the blind students to follow them. Just like the Israelites, and just like the Pharisees, the blind are leading the blind into a pit. The predictions of Jesus and the apostles were accurate.

Christians think they need to read doctrine books. They think they need to learn theology. They think they need to fill their minds with the ideas of educated scholars. They think those men know God better than others.

The Protestant Reformation brought man's teaching to the center of the Christian life. The reason the sermon is the focal point of the Church service is because Martin Luther insisted that Christians needed to learn from formally educated, scholarly men. Once again, what we do is a direct result of what we believe. It's not enough to just change the structure – it is crucial to address the beliefs behind the structure. Reading a doctrine book alongside the Bible is just as corrupting as having the entire congregation passively sit and listen to one man speak.

Christians have followed the example of the Israelites and the Pharisees instead of the example of Jesus and the apostles. The Church was founded by uneducated, common men. They didn't have formal training. They weren't puffed up on doctrine, theology, and complex terminology.

They knew God. That was all that was required.

### **You Have Only One Teacher**

As Christians, we live under the promised New Covenant. When God created the nation of Israel, he made a covenant with them. A *covenant* is essentially a fancy word for an *agreement*. God made an agreement with the Israelites that he would be their God, and they would be his people as long as they obeyed him. But, if they didn't obey him, he would reject them and drive them out of their own country. Hundreds of years later, that is exactly what happened.

But, when it happened, God promised a new covenant. He said, "Look, the time is coming," says the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring



them out of Egypt. I was a husband to them, but they broke my covenant,' says the Lord. 'This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel at the time,' says the Lord: 'I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. People will no longer have to teach their neighbors and brothers to know the Lord, because all people will know me, from the least to the most important,' says the Lord. 'I will forgive them for their iniquities, and I will not remember their sins anymore.'"<sup>1</sup>

As Hebrews explained,<sup>2</sup> this promise was fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus established the New Covenant through his death and resurrection.<sup>3</sup>

Today, most Christians think of the New Covenant as the promise of forgiveness through Jesus. But, look again at what God had promised. Forgiveness was included, yes. But it was only the last line. The majority of the promised New Covenant was a promise that God would put his laws in our minds and write them on our hearts, and that no one would have to teach others to know the Lord, because all his people would know him.

Part of the very fabric of the New Covenant is that we don't need teachers! Israel had fallen away from God because they followed false teachers. So, God promised a new covenant – a covenant in which no one would need teachers in the first place!

Jesus confirmed this. He said, "But you must not be called Teacher, because you have only one Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters together."<sup>4</sup>

No Christian should be called "Teacher." There is only one Teacher – Jesus. In the New Covenant, there is no longer any need for anyone else to teach you. In the New Covenant, you have one Teacher – the One who reveals the truth to those who become like little children. In the New Covenant, Christians do not need to be taught by other men – they have the Spirit, and the Spirit teaches us everything.

This means you have no need to read doctrine books. You have no need to read theology books. You have no need to read devotionals. You have no need to read any Christian book. You have no need to listen to sermons. You have no need to follow Christian blogs. You have no need to fill your mind with the information spewing out of the mouths of Christian teachers, preachers, writers, theologians, and other leaders.

Like the apostles, you can know God. You can know the truth – even though you are a common, uneducated person. You have no need for a man

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Hebrews 8:7-10:23

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-25

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 23:8

to teach you anything.

John wrote about false teachers who would rise up in the Church. He said, “I have written these things about those people who are trying to lead you the wrong way. *As for you, the anointing that you received from him remains in you, so you do not need any other teacher. His anointing teaches you about everything, and it is true, not false...*”<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament, *the anointing* is the Holy Spirit. John was telling us that we have no need for anyone to teach us. The Holy Spirit is enough. We don’t need any man. We don’t need to listen to sermons. We don’t need to read books. We don’t need to watch videos. The Holy Spirit alone – without help from anyone else – will teach us everything.

In the context of this verse, John was warning Christians about false teachers. He was saying that the only way to make sure you are not led astray by false teachers is to not follow any men in the first place! The only way to make sure you are not deceived by the deceivers is to not listen to them! You have no need for any other teacher! The Anointing teaches you about everything!

Jesus said the same thing. He said, “But the Helper will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I told you. This Helper is the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name.”<sup>2</sup> He also said, “But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you into all truth.”<sup>3</sup>

Christians can avoid being deceived simply by not following men. The Holy Spirit will teach *everything* you need to know – not *some* of what you need to know. The Holy Spirit will lead you into *all* truth – not *some* truth.

When John warned us about false teachers, his solution was not to pick the teachers who teach the “right things.” His solution was not to listen to teachers, all the while remembering that the Holy Spirit is really the one teaching you through those teachers. His solution was not to keep reading books and listening to sermons until you’re able to distinguish between true teachers and false teachers.

No – his solution was to recognize that you have no need to listen to them in the first place! If you want to guarantee that you’re not led into total and utter destruction by false teachers, then just stop listening to them! That’s it! That’s all you have to do! Let the Holy Spirit be your Teacher!

Similarly, when Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he wrote three-and-a-half chapters about how they should stop following teachers.<sup>4</sup> Most Christians read this section and miss his whole point. They miss his real instruction. His

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:26-27, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> John 14:26

<sup>3</sup> John 16:13

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:6

*point* was summed up in his concluding statement: “Brothers and sisters, I have used Apollos and myself as examples so you could learn through us the meaning of the saying, ‘Follow only what is written in the Scriptures.’ Then you will not be more proud of one person than another.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul and Apollos were both well-known Christian teachers in the first century. They knew each other, and they both taught the truth. Paul didn’t have a problem with what Apollos taught, but he wanted the Corinthians to stop following men. He wanted them to follow Scripture and Scripture alone. He wanted them to be taught by the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> He wanted them to stop valuing what this world values. He wanted them to stop thinking they could learn the truth from any man.

Christians must stop turning to books, videos, sermons, blogs, music, or any other form of human teaching. If Christians want to avoid the apostasy that Jesus and the apostles predicted, the only way to do that is to avoid the false teachers they predicted. And, the only way to avoid those false teachers is to simply stop following *any* teacher.

You do not need to listen to sermons. You do not need to read Christian books. You do not need to read Christian blogs. You do not need to watch Christian videos. You do not need to listen to Christian podcasts. You do not need any man to teach you. The Holy Spirit is enough. The whole idea of modern Christian teaching is man-made. It was created by men who wanted followers.

Obviously, this brings up the question: Why does the Bible say that God gives teachers to the Church?<sup>3</sup>

That’s a great question! We will look at that later in this book. But, suffice it to say for now, God gives teachers to the Church for a completely different purpose than how Christians use teachers today.

## **Look at the Fruit**

Before concluding this chapter, I’d like to look at one final thing Jesus and the apostles taught and compare it to a few noteworthy examples from Church history.

When Jesus warned us about false teachers, he said, “Be careful of false prophets. They come to you disguised like sheep, but underneath they are ferocious wolves. You will know these people by their fruit. Grapes don’t come from thornbushes, and figs don’t come from thorny weeds. In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 4:6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Ephesians 4:11-12 (among others)

good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. In the same way, you will know these false prophets by their fruit.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, it is possible to identify false prophets by their fruit. Why? Because good trees will only produce good fruit, and bad trees will only produce bad fruit.

John said something similar. He said, “Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”<sup>2</sup>

He also said, “Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. Anyone who continues to sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has been sinning since the beginning. The Son of God came for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s work. All who are God’s children do not continue sinning, because God’s seed remains in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God. In this way it is apparent who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not do what is right are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus and John were both saying the same thing: It is possible to identify a tree by its fruit. If someone doesn’t love the brothers and sisters, then they have never known Christ, and they don’t have life. Good trees will bear only good fruit – they will love others; and bad trees will bear only bad fruit – they will not love others. John also explained what real love is (we will look at this in more detail in a later chapter).

Good trees will not have bad fruit, which means, if you can see *some* bad fruit, the whole tree must be bad. True believers will make all their decisions around what is good for others. They will think about others, and not themselves. If we see someone who is not doing that, then we can know that that person doesn’t know Christ – that person is bearing bad fruit. According to John, that person is not a child of God, but is a child of the devil. They aren’t true Christians.

If a tree has *any* bad fruit, it is a bad tree. And, if it is a bad tree, it will not have *any* good fruit. That means, if you see a tree that has some bad fruit and some good fruit, it simply means you’re wrong about something – you

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:15-20

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:9-11

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:7-10

think you're seeing good fruit where there is none, or you think you're seeing bad fruit where there is none. There are no other options unless Jesus was a liar.

Therefore, if you see a bad tree, you shouldn't go up to that tree and start picking fruit from it and eating it. You can't get any good fruit from a bad tree!

So, keeping that in mind, let's look at the Protestant Reformation. I grew up in the Protestant Church, I considered myself a Protestant for almost three decades, and my experience has been, almost exclusively, Protestantism. Therefore, I will focus my attention throughout this book on Protestantism. However, if you are Catholic, Orthodox, or any other sect of Christianity, I encourage you to continue on, as I believe there is a lot of stuff in this book for you as well.

The Protestant Church is built on the foundational work of the Reformers. Every Protestant Church (including Baptists, Methodists, Evangelicals, Pentecostals, Seventh-Day Adventists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and many others...) is founded on, and centered around the teaching of the Reformers.

Martin Luther<sup>1</sup> was the original founder of the Protestant Reformation. Nearly everyone has heard of him – Christians talk about him, quote him, make movies about him, and teach what he taught. He is seen as an all-around good guy. He saw the corruption of the Catholic Church in the early sixteenth century, he knew what they were doing was wrong, and he began a movement away from them. He taught people the *priesthood of all believers*. This essentially meant that everyone can participate. This meant that everyone has access to God. This meant that we don't need any man to represent us before God anymore. He wanted to move away from the priests in the Catholic Church. He wanted every Christian to feel free to pray to God directly. He wanted every Christian to feel free to read Scripture themselves. He wanted every Christian to know they could receive forgiveness from God directly – they didn't have to go through a priest.

But there was a problem. Martin Luther said he believed in the priesthood of all believers, but when it really came down to it, he proved by his actions that he didn't hold to his own theology. When push came to shove, the Protestant Reformation ended up with the same thing the Catholic Church had – a priesthood of selected individuals who ruled over the laity (*laity* means *the people*).

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<sup>1</sup> Not to be confused with Martin Luther King Jr. – that was someone else. I know some people who didn't know this, so I'm just clarifying – they're two different people.

The Anabaptists, on the other hand, took Martin Luther's teaching to its own logical conclusion. They believed every believer should be able to contribute to the Church meeting. They believed anyone should be able to stand up and speak – not just the pastor or preacher. Furthermore, if someone stood up to speak, then the first person should sit down and stop speaking.

Imagine what it would be like if your pastor was giving a message on Sunday and someone else in the congregation stood up, began speaking, and your pastor sat down and let that other person speak instead. In the church I grew up in, if this happened, the second person would be escorted out of the building by a security team while the pastor continued his sermon.

But the Anabaptists didn't do what Christians do today. They believed the first person should sit down and stop speaking – and the second person should be allowed to continue. They believed this because it is, in fact, what Paul directly taught.<sup>1</sup> It is entirely biblical. But you might notice that the Protestant Church, for the most part, doesn't do this. That's because Martin Luther didn't like it. He wanted to control who was able to teach so people would only teach what lined up with his theology.

What did Martin Luther do?

He said their belief was “from the pit of hell,” and he declared that anyone who practiced this should be put to death. As stated by Peter Hoover, “Martin Luther and his colleagues met at Speyer on the Rhein in 1529... At that time they passed a resolution: ‘Every Anabaptist, both male and female, shall be put to death by fire, sword, or in some other way’”<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther worshiped the Sunday sermon. He worshiped teaching. It was the focal-point of everything he built on. He wanted everyone to follow men. He wanted everyone to learn from teachers.

As a result of Martin Luther's declaration, one hundred and sixteen laws were put in place in Germany – where Martin Luther was influential, and where he lived – making Anabaptism a crime worthy of death.<sup>3</sup> It was a capital offense. As a result of his stance (and the stance of other prominent Reformers), thousands of Anabaptist believers were tortured and put to death.

More than this, Martin Luther wrote *On The Jews And Their Lies*. In this treatise, “he argues that Jewish synagogues and schools be set on fire, their prayer books destroyed, rabbis forbidden to preach, homes burned, and property and money confiscated. They should be shown no mercy or kindness, afforded no legal protection, and ‘these poisonous envenomed worms’ should be drafted into forced labor or expelled for all time. He also

<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 14:26-31

<sup>2</sup> Peter Hoover, *Secret of the Strength*, Benchmark Press, 1999, p. 198

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity<sup>2</sup>: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices*, BarnaBooks, 2002, 2012, p.129

seems to advocate their murder, writing “[W]e are at fault in not slaying them.”<sup>1</sup>

This book had a significant impact in Germany several centuries later, when it was used as one of the primary influences to support the Holocaust. His book was often found at Nazi rallies, it was referenced throughout the short and tragic time of Nazi Germany, and was cited on numerous occasions during the Nuremberg Trials after World War Two had ended.<sup>2</sup>

The fruit born by Martin Luther is that people were killed as a direct result of his teaching. The fruit born by Martin Luther was that if anyone opposed his views or held a different view, that person should be put to death. The fruit born by Martin Luther was murder, hatred, and violence.

Jesus said, “Love your enemies.”<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther said, “Burn their schools, burn their homes, confiscate their money, and force them into hard labor.”

Jesus said, “Show mercy, just as your Father shows mercy.”<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther said, “they should be shown no mercy or kindness.”

Jesus said that those who want to kill others are children of the devil – even if they think they are children of God.<sup>5</sup> The devil is a murderer, and only his children kill those who oppose them. Martin Luther responded to opposition the same way the Pharisees did – with threats, persecution, violence, and murder.

These are just a few examples of the fruit that came from the life of Martin Luther. Yet he is still considered by many Christians as the greatest theologian who has ever lived. The Protestant Church still, to this day, stands on the teaching of Martin Luther. His gospel is the gospel preached in almost every Church across the Western world. People still believe that he taught the correct path to salvation. They eat the fruit from his tree.

Let’s look at another Reformer – John Calvin. Many people follow John Calvin. I grew up in a Church that followed John Calvin. He was quoted. He was admired. He was held as someone that we should follow. He was considered a hero of the Christian faith.

But did John Calvin bear good fruit or bad fruit?

John Calvin held a prominent position in the town of Geneva. He had authority. He had power. He used his position to maintain authority and power.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On\\_the\\_Jews\\_and\\_Their\\_Lies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_the_Jews_and_Their_Lies), 2020

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Christopher J Probst, *Demonizing the Jews: Luther and the Protestant Church in Nazi Germany*, 2012

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:27

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:36

<sup>5</sup> Ref. John 8:31-47

When anyone came along, questioning what Calvin taught, he had them put to death. He requested beheadings. He had people burned at the stake. He not only killed them, he praised God when his theological opponents were tortured and given slow, painful deaths.

Jacques Gruet, who disagreed with Calvin, placed a letter in Calvin's pulpit. The letter accused Calvin of being a hypocrite. Calvin's response? He had Jacques Gruet arrested, tortured every day for a month, and beheaded on July 26, 1547. He then searched out and found Gruet's own book and burned it. He also burned down Gruet's house while his wife was thrown outside to watch.<sup>1 2</sup>

Calvin had a longtime acquaintance who had stood by his side against the authority of the Catholic Church. This man, Michael Servetus, didn't even oppose Calvin. All he did was return a copy of Calvin's book with some critical comments in the margins. He meant no harm to Calvin, and he fully intended to remain Calvin's friend. But Calvin was outraged.

Servetus attempted to visit Calvin again – believing they were still friends. Calvin had him arrested and charged with heresy. He was sentenced to death. On October 27, 1553, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake. They used green wood for the fire so it would kill him slowly. He begged for mercy and prayed to Jesus as he slowly died at the hands of his longtime friend.<sup>3 4</sup>

Calvin led the Church in the small town of Geneva. During the time of Calvin's reign, fifty-eight people were executed for various reasons such as heresy, blasphemy, witchcraft, or adultery. Another seventy-six people were banished from the town. Countless others suffered terrible punishments for their "crimes" – women imprisoned for dancing, men imprisoned for laughing during Calvin's sermon, and a child was whipped for accusing his mother of being a thief.<sup>5</sup>

As many of his followers are quick to point out, Calvin was not the man who made the final decision about who would live, or who would die. But, as the spiritual leader in a city that enforced his ideology, he had a strong influence on the magistrates, his opinion carried weight, and he used his authority to influence decisions. Furthermore, he openly condoned and approved of the executions.

He wrote about Michael Servetus seven years before the incident,

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/hcc8.iv.xiii.xii.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, II, p. 502

<sup>3</sup> Ref. <http://www.reenactingtheway.com/blog/john-calvin-had-people-killed-and-bad-bible-interpretation-justified-it>

<sup>4</sup> Ref. <https://www.evangelicaloutreach.org/michael-servetus.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Modern Christianity; the Swiss Reformation*, 2d ed., rev, 1898, pp. 490-493



saying, “If he comes [to Geneva], I shall never let him go out alive if my authority has weight.”<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, Calvin’s authority carried some sort of weight.

When Servetus was arrested, he wrote, “I hope that sentence of death will at least be passed upon him.”<sup>2</sup>

And after Servetus was killed, Calvin wrote, “Honour, glory, and riches shall be the reward of your pains; but above all, do not fail to rid the country of those scoundrels, who stir up the people to revolt against us. Such monsters should be exterminated, as I have exterminated Michael Servetus the Spaniard.”<sup>3</sup>

John Calvin wrote about himself, saying, “I have exterminated Michael Servetus...” So, clearly, that was his own opinion. His fans today say, “John Calvin didn’t kill him.” But Calvin himself said he did!

John Calvin used his influence to have people killed, he celebrated their deaths, and he never repented of his actions until the day he died. He often wrote about their deaths, continuing to argue that he did the right thing.

This is the man many Christians still follow to this day. And Christians are content to just say, “Well, he was wrong about a couple of things.”

No.

He hated the brothers and sisters. He hated his enemies. He hated the lost.

The apostle John said, “Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.”<sup>4</sup> “In this way it is evident who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not do what is right are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>5</sup> “Everyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderers have eternal life in them.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Scripture, if John Calvin didn’t love others, then he never knew Christ. He was a murderer – both for hating others, and for actually killing others. As he himself said, “I have exterminated Michael Servetus.” That’s his own acknowledgment! It doesn’t matter what excuses modern Christians use to defend his actions. It doesn’t matter how much they say that he wasn’t the one in charge. By his own admission, he participated in Michael Servetus’ death! And, as Jesus said, “...by your words you will be justified, and

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, in a letter to Farel, Feb. 13, 1546

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, in a letter to Farel, Aug. 20, 1553

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, in a letter to Marquis Paet, 1561

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:9

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:10

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:15

by your words you will be condemned.”<sup>1</sup>

John Calvin was a murderer. And as John said, “no murderers have eternal life in them.” He was not a child of God, he was a child of the devil. He was a murderer. He was a servant of Satan. He bore bad fruit – ample bad fruit. According to Jesus, that means he is going to be cut down and thrown into the fire. He is a blind guide, and if you follow him you will also fall into the pit.

But the Church today forgets about the victims. They turn a blind eye to those killed at the hands of the Reformers. They’re too busy following and learning “biblical truths” from the murderers. They happily pick rotten fruit from a bad tree and eat it without noticing how sick the tree is.

Why do we follow men without first examining their fruit?

Sadly, many Christians today even know about this fruit, but they still defend Martin Luther and John Calvin. I’ve heard Christians say things like, “this is how things were handled in their time. It’s easy to look back and criticize and think they should have known better. They were men of their time.” This is the predominant response from people who want to defend these men. But it’s an empty response!

Jesus and the apostles lived at a time when people were often stripped naked and crucified in the streets. They lived at a time when heretics were stoned to death. They lived at a time when the Jewish mindset was to revolt against Rome – which led to a massive war and millions dead. But they weren’t like the people of their time because they were filled with the Holy Spirit! They were different! They were changed! True Christians don’t respond like the people of their time. True Christians are transformed by the Spirit – which is why Jesus said a tree can be identified by its fruit.

Christians also say, “They had some flaws. But they did a lot of good, too. They just didn’t get everything right.”

In other words, Christians think Jesus is a liar.

Jesus said if a tree has *any* bad fruit, then the whole tree is bad, and it is utterly incapable of bearing good fruit. But Christians today say that it’s okay to follow a man who bore a lot of bad fruit because he bore some good fruit, too. They reject the word of God for the sake of their own traditions.<sup>2</sup>

Someone is lying. Either bad trees can bear some good fruit and good trees can bear some bad fruit and Jesus is a liar – or modern Christians are foolishly defending men and wholeheartedly following men who were actually servants of Satan – wolves in sheep’s clothing – two of the many false teachers who lead people into destruction that Jesus and the apostles all warned us

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12:37

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3,6

about.

If you are following either of these men and view them as great Christian teachers who maybe had a few things wrong – Jesus would say, “No. A bad tree cannot have good fruit.” If you still believe and accept the gospel created by Martin Luther, then you still believe it’s possible to find some good fruit on a bad tree – or, that it’s possible for a good tree to produce some bad fruit. If you believe these men and think you can learn from these men, then you prove through your actions that you trust and believe in them more than you trust and believe in Jesus. Your faith is in Martin Luther or John Calvin – not in Jesus.

These two men are just two examples of many.

Do not pick fruit off a rotten tree. And, if the fruit is rotten, then you can know the whole tree is rotten. Remember what Jesus said. Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. Every person following a blind guide will also fall into the pit.

Are you eating from a rotten tree?

The Protestant Reformation changed things about the Church, but they did not restore Christianity. That’s why the Church today still does not look like the Book of Acts. They didn’t restore Christianity – they reformed Catholicism. They made it look a little different, but they held onto Pagan practices, they held onto false teaching, they continued persecuting those who opposed them, and they created their own new false teaching.

Do not follow men.

You have one Teacher, and that is all you need. Put down your theology books. Put down those sermons. Put down your favorite preacher. Pick up your Bible. Ask the Lord to tear down everything that’s bad, and to teach you.

If you ask, you will receive. If you seek, you will find. If you knock, the door will be opened.<sup>1</sup> Keep on asking. Keep on searching. Keep on knocking. Never be ashamed of your questions. Never stop asking. Never stop searching until you arrive at a knowledge of the truth.<sup>2</sup> Never stop asking until you have matured into the image of Jesus. Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit will teach you everything. Do you realize how amazing that is? That is a promise for you to hold onto. So, hold onto that, and keep asking.

You need to follow Scripture, and Scripture alone.

If you keep searching, you will find the truth. If you keep knocking, the door will be opened to you. God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:7-8; Luke 11:9-13

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:7

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Luke 11:5-13

Too many Christians read the Bible and don't ask questions. They think it's doubting to ask questions. They think it's doubting the faith. You're not doubting the faith. You're doubting the teachings of men. When those teachings of men do not match up with what you read in the Bible, it causes doubt. It causes questions. They want you to push these questions away because they don't want you to question their teaching.

Don't push it away.

When you ask questions and you really want the truth, the Bible will stay firm. Your questions are not going to shake God's foundation! Ask away. All it will do is lead you further into the truth. If you push those questions away, you're proving that you think your questions might break something in Scripture – you're proving that you're afraid of what the answer might be because it might make you realize the Bible isn't real.

That won't happen! Don't doubt that the Bible is true – doubt that the teaching you have heard is true. The reason questions come up is because the Bible doesn't match our lives. We see things in the Bible that we can't explain or relate to. The only reason it doesn't match your life is because your life is wrong and your theology is wrong. Your doctrines are wrong.

So question those.

As Christians, we have no need for a man to teach us. The Holy Spirit is our Teacher. He will lead us into all truth. So, if you're reading the Bible, but you're not understanding much of it, it means the Spirit isn't teaching you. It probably means you're reading the Bible through the lens of what you've been told it means, holding onto a belief that isn't true, and trying to understand how the Bible says something it doesn't actually say!

The answer is not to just turn to a man to explain it to you. The answer is to figure out why the Spirit isn't teaching you. So, figure out how to solve that problem. Let go of all the teaching you've been holding onto, and ask the Spirit to begin to teach you.

Jesus gave us a promise that the Holy Spirit will teach us *everything* – not *some* things. He didn't say you're going to be taught some things by the Holy Spirit and some things by teachers. He didn't say you're going to learn some things, but you're always going to be wrong about other things. He said the Spirit will teach you everything.

Hold onto that promise, and start asking questions. Start believing in your Teacher.

We cannot only question the rituals and structure of the Church today. We cannot meet in homes, but still read theology books. We cannot have participatory meetings, but still listen to sermons in our free time and read Christian books in the morning. We must question what we've been taught.

## DEAD CHURCH

We must second-guess our own beliefs, theologies, and doctrines. We must re-evaluate everything we thought we knew. False teachers have come and have filled our minds with lies. Those lies are the basis for why Christians do things the way they do them.

The reason we do what we do is because men have told us to do it that way – and those same men have taught us our theology and our doctrine. They were the ones who told us how to be saved. They were wrong about the rituals. They were wrong about the traditions. And they are wrong about the theology.

We cannot tear down part of a house and start rebuilding if the foundation is still bad. We cannot try to fix a building that was built by false teachers. We must tear down the entire house and start from scratch. We must start from the ground up. If we don't tear down everything, we will still build a bad house.

We need to go back to Scripture – and Scripture alone – to determine what it means to believe in Jesus, what it means to obey him, and what it means to be a Christian. We need to set aside all other books, sermons, videos, blogs, podcasts, doctrines, and anything else given to us by men – whether we trust those men or not. We need to start from scratch. What did Jesus teach? What did the apostles teach? What was Christianity to the first Christians? What did they believe? And what did they do?

As we go through this book, we're going to address many different things the Church has wrong. But we must understand *why* the Church is wrong. The Church is wrong because instead of following Scripture and Scripture alone, we've followed teachers. We have done the exact same thing Jesus and the apostles warned us not to do.

It is the biggest warning in the New Testament, and the Church ignores it. The Bible warns us – time and time again – that if we get this wrong, we will be deceived, and the result will be that we are led to destruction.

It's time to change.

# Chapter 3

## What Must I Do to Be Saved? Most “Christians” Don’t Know

Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a very familiar verse. Almost every Christian knows this verse. Almost every Christian can quote this verse. For many people, this verse summarizes what Christianity is all about. There’s another very similar to it:

“Enter through the narrow gate. The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and many people enter through that gate. But the gate is small and the road is difficult that leads to true life. Only a few people find that road.”<sup>2</sup>

Typically, when we think of the wide gate and the easy road, we think of all the people in the world who are not Christians and don’t believe in Jesus. And we think of the small, narrow road and the small, narrow gate as those who do believe in Jesus. We think of those people as all those who believe in Jesus, and we think that they can enter because they believe in Jesus.

Essentially, we see these two verses as very connected. Jesus is the only way. He is the only truth. And he is the only life. No one can come to the Father, except through him. Therefore, he is the narrow gate. He is the narrow road. There’s only one way – and it’s through him.

We see Jesus as saying, “Believing in me is the only way for you to have eternal life. It’s the only way, it’s a narrow way, and very few people will believe in me, but many people will choose to not believe in me.” We see him as distinguishing between Christians and non-Christians.

But there’s a problem.

That’s not all Jesus said about the narrow gate. There is another verse where Jesus also spoke about the narrow gate, and almost no one knows what he said because it doesn’t fit with our modern understanding.

Jesus said, “Try hard to enter through the narrow door, because many people will try to enter there, but they will not be able.”<sup>3</sup>

In this verse, Jesus did not just say, “Try to enter through the narrow

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:6

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>3</sup> Luke 13:24

gate because the other way is bad.” No, he said, “Try hard to enter through the narrow gate, because many people will try to enter *there* and not be able.” Jesus was talking about the narrow road. He was talking about people who know that there’s a difference between the wide gate and the narrow gate. He was talking about people who are going down the narrow road, they get to the narrow gate, and they still fail. They recognize that the narrow gate is the only way to life, they try to enter through that gate, but they can’t. They know that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. They know the only way to come to the Father is through him. So, they try to come to the Father through him. They try to enter through the way, the truth, and the life. They believe in Jesus, they approach the narrow gate... but they still fail to enter.

Why?

This verse is a verse that very few Christians know exists. It doesn’t fit with what the Church teaches us about salvation. We don’t understand why Jesus would say that many people will try to enter through the narrow gate and still fail.

Think about it. If entering through the narrow gate means believing in Jesus, then don’t people know whether or not they believe in him? Why would he have to say, “try hard?”

As it turns out, when he said, “try hard,” he was saying something remarkably similar to what Peter said: “My brothers and sisters, make every effort to be certain that you really are called and chosen by God...”<sup>1</sup>

Peter was saying that we need to make every effort to be certain that we’re called and chosen. Jesus was saying that we need to try hard to enter. They were both saying the same thing: Put some effort into it.

But, if getting in is about just believing in Jesus, how hard is that? Why would we have to try hard and make every effort? What are they saying?

A lot of times when Christians read Scripture, they start to have questions come to mind: *Am I really saved? What does this really mean? How do I know this is true? Do I really believe it? Why does my experience not line up with what the Bible describes in the book of Acts? Why do some of the promises in the Bible seem to not be true?*

These questions are hard. These questions are scary. These questions, when faced, force them to re-evaluate everything they think and believe.

But, most of the time, instead of pursuing those questions and searching for the truth, they push those questions away. They just ignore them. They shove them away, lock them in a box, and don’t think about them.

This happens because we have been told that asking hard questions is

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 2:10

doubting. We’ve been told that it’s wrong to ask hard questions. We’ve been told that we need to just believe without questioning anything.

But that’s not true.

Peter said to make every effort to be certain that you really are called and chosen. Jesus said that we should try hard to enter through the narrow gate. That means we need to open that box up and face those questions – because if you’re not asking those questions, you’re not obeying Scripture. If you’re not asking those questions, you’re not making every effort to be certain that you really are chosen by God.

Let’s be honest and straightforward: The only reason to not ask those questions is if you think Scripture can’t hold up to scrutiny. We’ve been told that it’s doubting to ask those questions. But in reality, it’s actually doubting to lock those questions away and ignore them. The reason it’s doubting is because the only reason to push those questions away is if you think that asking those questions will inevitably result in you abandoning the faith because you asked a question that poked holes in what the Bible says. The only reason to ignore those questions is because you’re afraid of what answers you might find. Or, you’re afraid that there won’t be any answers at all. Pushing those questions away shows that you really believe, deep down, that if you ask hard questions, you’ll find that the Bible doesn’t have the answers.

Instead of making sure that you are on the right path – instead of trying hard to enter through the narrow gate – you ignore all the questions and you just plug your ears and close your eyes, and loudly say, “I’m not going to pay attention to the things in Scripture that contradict my paradigm. I’m going to just ignore the things in the Bible that don’t prove to be true in my own life. I’m going to ignore all the verses that contradict what I believe about the Gospel, about Jesus, about the Kingdom of God, and about the Holy Spirit.”

So many people go through life, refusing to ask questions about countless Bible verses that just don’t make sense. Like the Pharisees, they’re so convinced that they’re already right that they don’t search for the truth no matter the cost.

This approach is irresponsible. It’s foolish. It comes from doubting. It comes from fear. It comes from false teachers telling you to not question what they’re trying to get you to believe. You’re not supposed to have blind faith. You’re supposed to have knowledge, understanding, and wisdom.<sup>1</sup> You’re supposed to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.<sup>2</sup> You’re supposed to understand the Bible – not just memorize what it says and believe that it’s true.

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13; Romans 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; Ephesians 1:15-23, 3:14-19, 4:13-16; Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:9-14, 2:1-3; Hebrews 5:12-14

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:5-7



So, ask your questions! Don't shy away from them! But, when you ask, be willing to let go of those doctrines and theologies you've been taught by people. Ask your questions with a willingness to change any of your beliefs – even beliefs about the Gospel and salvation. Ask your questions without holding tightly to what you already think you know. If you're asking hard questions, that means you see something in the Bible that contradicts what you currently believe – so be willing, if necessary, to let go of what you currently believe. Ask your questions, expecting that there is something wrong with you and your beliefs – not something wrong with the Bible.

And most importantly, ask your questions to the Lord, not to men. And when you ask, expect him to teach you. Keep searching for the answers, because he will lead you to the answers.

It's extremely important to ask hard questions. It is extremely important to understand what Jesus was talking about. Because here's the thing – Jesus was saying that there is a possibility that you will try to enter through the narrow gate and fail. Do you have any idea how to make sure you're not one of those people? Most Christians have been taught that we get into heaven by just believing in Jesus. But Jesus said that there will be many people who try to get into heaven by believing in him, and they will fail. They know about the narrow road, they try to enter through the narrow gate, they know Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but even still, they fail to enter.

What was he talking about?

This isn't the only time Jesus said this. In fact, that verse in Matthew that we're all so familiar with – where he said the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction but the gate is small and narrow that leads to life<sup>1</sup> – in that verse, he was saying the same thing. In that verse, he was also warning us that many will try to enter through the narrow gate and will fail.

We can know this is what he was saying by looking at the context. Immediately after saying this, Jesus began warning us about false prophets and false teachers, telling us that you can recognize them by their fruit.<sup>2</sup> In other words, he immediately began warning us that not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is, in fact, a Christian. And then, immediately after that, he said:

“Not all those who say to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On that day many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works in your name?’”

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-20

Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who do evil.’”<sup>1</sup>

So, look at the full context – Jesus said that we should travel down the narrow road and enter through the narrow gate. He said that many will travel down the broad and easy road, resulting in destruction, but few will travel down the narrow and difficult road, resulting in life. Then he said that not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is really a Christian, and that we can recognize them by their fruit – whether or not they do what God wants.

He said that people will call him “Lord,” and not enter. He said that people will prophesy in his name and not enter. He said that people will cast out demons in his name and not enter. He said that people will do many mighty works in his name and not enter.

All of this is in the same context as the “narrow road” verse. All of this is part of the same warning he gave us in that verse.

The people who thought they were Christians, when they really weren’t, were clearly trying to enter through the narrow gate. The people calling him “Lord,” were clearly trying to enter through the narrow gate. The people who prophesied in his name, cast out demons in his name, and did miracles in his name were all clearly trying to enter through the narrow gate. All these people clearly believed that Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. All of them understood that he is the only way into heaven. All of them knew that they had to enter through the narrow gate, and all of them tried to enter through the narrow gate.

But they failed.

So, here’s my question for you: How do you know that you will be able to enter?

If calling Jesus “Lord” and trying to enter through the narrow gate is not necessarily enough, how do you know? How do you know that you are going to get in?

You must ask these questions. You need to know. You are not *trying hard to enter* if you just ignore this. You are not *making every effort* if you don’t ask these questions. It’s not doubting for you to say, “Am I wrong? Am I wrong about what I believe? Am I wrong about my understanding of Scripture?” God will teach you if you humble yourself before him! God will teach you if you make yourself like a little child. God will answer your questions. But you must bring your questions to God – not to other men.

Here’s what I’m getting at. Scripture tells us plainly that calling Jesus “Lord,” and trying to enter through the narrow gate does not guarantee that

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:21-23

we will be able to enter. Yet the Church is telling us that all we have to do is believe in Jesus and we'll get in. They quote Paul, saying, "if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and if you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved."<sup>1</sup> The Church tells us that this one verse is a step-by-step instruction for how to go to heaven. They treat it like this is the only verse in the Bible about what we must do to be saved. But they ignore the fact that Jesus described people who confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord, and who clearly believed that God had raised Jesus from the dead – after all, they were prophesying in his name, casting out demons in his name, and performing many mighty works in his name. Yet he said they still fail to enter.

Something isn't lining up. Is Scripture wrong or is the Church wrong? Something is wrong, because they're contradicting each other.

For us to understand why Jesus said what he said, we first need to understand what Jesus preached and what his apostles preached. Most of the time, when we read Scripture, we end up reading our own understanding into Scripture. We read what the Bible says, but we take what the Church has told us, and we think that the Bible is saying what the Church is saying, because the Church told us that that's what the Bible says.

Essentially, we read the Bible through colored glasses. The glasses we're wearing are coloring what we read. If you've got glasses with red lenses, and you've worn these glasses your whole life, then you'll look at the sky and think, "Oh, the sky is red!" You'll be staring right at it. You'll be looking at the same sky as everyone else – but you will think the sky is red, because you're looking through a red lens. As long as you leave those glasses on, you'll be completely convinced that the sky is red – because you've seen it for yourself! You've seen the sky! But if you take those glasses off, you'll see that the sky is obviously blue.

That's what we do with Scripture. We read Scripture through these red-lensed glasses, and we say, "Ah, yeah this is what it's saying." We're convinced we know and understand what we're reading, but the only reason we think what we think is because we're wearing the glasses of what the Church taught us. We're completely convinced that the Bible says what we think it says because we looked up the verses and saw it for ourselves! But we read those verses through the lens of what we were told it's saying. We read those verses with the mindset given to us by the Church.

For example, we listen to a sermon on humility, and we read a book about being humble, and then every time we read Bible verses about humility,

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 10:9

we think we understand it, but we’re really just using the definition of *humility* that we were given by the Church. We don’t recognize that the biblical definition of *humility* is totally different than anything any modern Christians are considering. We don’t realize that we don’t understand what the Bible is actually saying when it talks about humility. We don’t pay attention to whether our definition is really what Scripture is teaching. Or, we listen to a sermon on a particular verse, we go through life quoting that verse, and using that verse as an encouragement or a reminder of a promise, but we never recognize the fact that we’re taking that verse completely out of context, and it’s really saying the exact opposite of what we think it’s saying.

What’s most alarming is that we do this with the Gospel. We do this with what the Bible teaches about how to have eternal life. Essentially, we’re playing with fire and dynamite at the same time. It’s a matter of life and death – and we’re not taking it seriously at all.

The Bible strongly warns us to not be deceived by false teachers. It warns us that those false teachers will be everywhere, deceiving many people. It warns us that they will be using the Bible, and they will be quoting Scripture. They will be telling us that what they’re teaching is perfectly in line with Scripture, and they will be able to point at verses that seem to back them up. They will distort Scripture, twisting it to say something that it doesn’t actually say. But most people won’t recognize that it’s distorted. Most people will believe their lies and think they’re believing what Scripture teaches. When it comes to a matter of eternal life and eternal death, most people will just take their word for it. They won’t question it. They won’t search. They will simply allow themselves to be led away to their own deaths. They’ll read the Bible, thinking they understand it, but they won’t recognize that the very words they’re reading say something completely different than what they think it says.

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If we want to understand why Jesus said what he said, then we must approach Scripture without assuming anything. We must read the Bible without bringing any outside influence with us. We must base our beliefs on Scripture alone – not on Scripture with man’s influence. We must look at *all* the verses that talk about salvation – not just the cookie-cutter verses that are always quoted by Christians.

Look at what Jesus said! Look at it for yourself and ignore everything

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-20, 13:24-30, 15:14, 16:5-12, 23:1-36, 24:4-5, 24:11; Mark 4:15, 7:5-13, 12:38-40, 13:5-6; Luke 21:8; Acts 20:29-31; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4, 11:12-15; Galatians 1:6-9, 4:17-20, 5:7-10; Ephesians 4:14, 5:6-7; Colossians 2:4, 2:8, 2:16-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 4:7, 6:3-5, 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 2:17-18, 3:1-9, 4:3-4; Titus 1:10-16; Hebrews 12:14-15, 13:9; 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3:15-17; 1 John 2:4, 2:9, 2:18-29, 3:1-10, 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude 3-19; Revelation 2:2, 2:14-17, 2:20-25

you've always been taught! Scripture says you can call Jesus "Lord" and not get into heaven. It says you can live a life where you clearly believe he was raised from the dead – where you prophesy, cast out demons, heal the sick, and perform miracles in his name, then you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord – yet you still don't get in. It says you can try to enter through him, recognizing that he is the way, the truth and the life, and recognizing that he is the narrow gate, yet still fail to enter. According to Jesus himself, confessing with your mouth that he is Lord, and believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead is not what will get you into heaven. Apparently, when Paul said that, we missed the point. His point must have not been to give us step-by-step instructions for salvation. We must be taking that verse out of context because Jesus clearly said that someone could meet those requirements and still not get in.

So, take those glasses the Church has given you and throw them out. Look at Scripture, by itself, without the influence of man's teaching, and see what it says.

What did Jesus and the apostles actually teach?

To understand what Jesus and the apostles taught, we must first make sure that we understand the words they used.

Many of the words found in the Bible are words that, quite frankly, we don't use outside of Church. For example, consider the word *repent*. Does anyone in the world use the word *repent*? No. It's not really a modern English word. It's an antiquated, Middle English word, rooted in Old French and Latin, that Christians decided to hold onto without updating into a modern term. Almost all Christians use the word, yet many Christians don't even know what it means.

What about *faith*? That's a little better. We understand the English word *faith*. But, does the English word *faith* mean the same thing as the Greek word that the apostles used in the New Testament? Remember – the Bible wasn't written in English. It was written in Ancient Greek. Just because we understand what a word means in English doesn't mean we understand what was originally written in the Greek.

The same is true with *love*. Sure, *love* is an English word that we use all the time. But do we understand God's definition of *love*, or do we just assume we know what it means to love because we use the world's definition? If Satan is the ruler of this world, and we're using his definition of *love*, then are we really doing what God wants us to do? Or, when God told us to love one another, did he mean something completely different than what we naturally think? And did he explain?

It's important for us to understand what the apostles meant when they

used these words (and many others!). We can’t just bring our own definitions. We can’t just assume we know what they were talking about. If we want to make sure we enter through the narrow gate without failing, then we need to make sure we understand what Jesus and the apostles meant when they used words like *repent*, *faith*, and *love*.

So, let’s start by talking about repentance.

On Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came, Peter stood up in front of the crowd and preached to the people about Jesus. He concluded his speech by saying:

“Therefore, all the people of Israel should know this with certainty: God has made Jesus – the man you crucified – both Lord and Messiah.’ When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and asked Peter and the other apostles, ‘What shall we do, brothers?’ Peter said to them, ‘Repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away. It is for everyone the Lord our God calls to himself.’”<sup>1</sup>

So, when Peter preached the gospel and the people said, “What shall we do?” the first thing he said was *repent*. That was the first step. And if you read through the New Testament, keeping an eye out for it, you’ll find that this is consistently the first step in following Jesus. John the Baptist preached repentance.<sup>2</sup> Jesus preached repentance.<sup>3</sup> Peter preached repentance.<sup>4</sup> Paul preached repentance.<sup>5</sup> They all preached a message of repentance.

So, why is repentance so important?

Every Christian knows that John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord.<sup>6</sup> He came to prepare people to receive Jesus. The people of Israel weren’t ready to receive Jesus. They needed someone to get them ready. John came for that purpose. He came to prepare them for Jesus. And his message was repentance, which means that repentance prepares you to receive the Lord. That’s why it’s the first step in following Jesus. That’s why, when the people asked Peter what they needed to do, the first thing he said was, “Repent.” Repentance prepares you to follow Jesus. It prepares the way for him to enter. If you haven’t repented, then you won’t be ready to follow him.

But the problem is, we read *repentance* in the Bible and we hear it at

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:36-39

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:1-2, 3:7-11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:2-11; Acts 19:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 5:31-32, 13:1-5, 15:1-10, 24:45-47

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 2:38, 3:19

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 26:19-20

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-4; Luke 3:2-6; John 1:31

Church, but we don't really understand what it means because it's not a word we use outside of Christianity. It's a religious word without real meaning to most modern Christians. But if repentance is the first step in following Jesus, then we need to know what it means to repent. We need to make sure we really understand it. It's not something to take lightly. If we don't know what repentance is, then we might think we've repented when we really haven't, which would mean we're not able or ready to follow Jesus when we think we are. If repentance is the first step in becoming a Christian, and we haven't repented (according to the Bible's definition of repentance), then we're not Christians – even if we think we are. If we don't understand repentance, then we might be dead – even though we have the reputation of being alive.

So, what does repentance mean?

If we look up the English word *repent* to see what it means, we get the following definition:

- 1) *To feel or express sincere regret or remorse about one's wrongdoing or sin.*
- 2) *To view or think of an action or omission with deep regret or remorse.*
- 3) *Feel regret or penitence about.* <sup>1</sup>

So, basically – to feel regret. In English, the word *repent* means *to regret or feel bad about something you did*.

However, the Bible wasn't written in English. It was written in Ancient Greek. And in the original Greek, the word that is translated as *repent* does not mean what the English word *repent* means. It does not mean *to feel regret*. It does not mean *to feel remorse*.

The Greek word was the word *μετάνοια* (*metanoia*). It's a word that was used consistently all throughout the literature of that time to express a fundamental change in thinking which led to a fundamental change in behavior and/or way of living. In other words, you change your mind, which causes you to change your actions and lifestyle.

To *repent* is to change your heart and change your actions on a fundamental level. It's not just regretting what you did. It's not just confessing sin. It's not just remorse. It's not just trying to avoid punishment. It's changing. It's no longer doing what you once did. It's a fundamental change, which means it's a complete lifestyle change. It's when you stop doing one thing, and you start doing something else. You stop living a certain way, and you start

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/repent>

living differently.

That is what they meant every time they said *repent* in Scripture.

It doesn’t mean *confess*. It doesn’t mean *feel remorse*. It doesn’t mean *feel regret*. It means *change*. You must change. If your life doesn’t fundamentally change, then you haven’t repented.

So, when Peter stood up on Pentecost and the people asked what they needed to do, the first thing he said is, “You must change the way you live.” Step one in following Jesus is that your entire life must fundamentally change – everything about who you are and what you do must become different.

As I mentioned earlier, John the Baptist came to prepare the way of the Lord, and he preached repentance. Scripture says that John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance.<sup>1</sup> It was what his message was all about. John didn’t preach a repentance of *feeling regret or remorse*. John’s message of repentance was that people must change their actions. He said, “Do the things that prove your repentance...”<sup>2</sup>

So, when he preached repentance, he said there’s something you must do to prove your repentance. It required action. And, John was not the only one who said this. In Acts 26, Paul stood before King Agrippa, and told him about his life and how he was saved. After he told the story of his conversion, he said, “Therefore, King Agrippa, after I had this vision from heaven, I obeyed it. I began telling people that they should repent and do works to show they really had changed...”<sup>3</sup>

Or in other words, Paul didn’t just preach “saved by faith.” His preaching included a message of repentance – a message telling people that their lives must change. His preaching included telling people that they must have works – works that prove they’ve really changed their lives.

Paul is the same guy who, elsewhere in Scripture, said that we’re saved by faith, not by works.<sup>4</sup> That “*faith and not works*” verse is championed by Protestants all around the world. It’s the verse I was raised on. It’s the foundation of the Protestant gospel. But here, Paul said that people *must* have works. He continued, explaining to Agrippa that this message of works was the message he proclaimed all over the world!<sup>5</sup>

So, we must be willing to ask ourselves – do we really understand what Paul was preaching? If Paul summarized his entire life’s ministry by saying that he preached that we need to change the way we’re living and have works that prove we really have changed, then is there something about the gospel he

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 19:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:8

<sup>3</sup> Acts 26:19-20

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 26:20-23



preached that most Christians don't understand? His summary of his own message is the exact opposite of what the Church teaches today.

The Church tells us that Paul taught that we're saved by faith, not works. The Church tells us that Paul taught that works are not required for salvation. But Paul himself said that his message was that people must repent and do works that prove they really have changed. He summarized his own message by saying that he taught works.

So, are we willing to question whether we really understand his message? If his summary is the exact opposite of ours, is it possible that we've missed his point?

Are we focusing so much on "*faith, not works*" that we end up missing the full picture? Are we, maybe, hanging our hat on what Protestants teach instead of on what the Bible actually says? If Paul summarized his own teaching by saying that we must have works, and we summarize his teaching by saying that we don't have to have works, then is it possible we're misunderstanding what he taught? Do we read the Bible through those colored lenses that distort what the Bible truly teaches? Is it possible that when we read the Bible, we think it's saying the exact opposite of what it's actually saying because we read it through the lens of what we've been told it says?

Think about it. If what Paul said to Agrippa is true, then Protestants have the entire gospel wrong. If what Paul said to Agrippa is true, then Protestants are teaching a false gospel, guiding people the wrong way, deceiving the masses, distorting the Scriptures, leading people into destruction, and completely fulfilling all of the prophetic warnings we have from God in Scripture about what is going to happen to the Church throughout the time we currently live in.

On the one hand, that should build your faith that the Bible is true. It should fill you with confidence – not doubt. Those prophecies in Scripture proved to be true. The biggest warning in the New Testament ended up being the biggest warning for a very good reason – hundreds of millions of people are blindly accepting the teaching of men without question or hesitation. The Bible told us this would happen. If it weren't happening, then the Bible wouldn't be true. But it is happening. It's happening exactly as predicted in Scripture.

But on the other hand, it should leave you very sobered, and it should cause you to second-guess what you've been taught, what you believe, and whether you're really following Scripture or just the teaching of men – men you were warned to not follow. It should make you pause. It should lead you to go look at Scripture as a whole – as one cohesive message – to see what the full message is, not just individual verses. It should make you realize that you have the words of Jesus and the teachings of the apostles right there in

Scripture, which means that on judgment day, you will be held to the standard in Scripture – not the standard you were taught by men.

Your eternal soul is on the line. So, are you saved by faith without works, as the Church teaches? Or is it necessary for you to have works, as Paul said?

John the Baptist was telling people, “You must have works that prove your repentance.” And Paul was telling people, “You must have works that prove your repentance.”

Works are important! Works prove your repentance.

When Jesus told us to try hard to enter through the narrow gate because people are going to try to enter through the narrow gate and fail, part of that – not the whole thing – is that people don’t understand repentance. They don’t understand that you can’t merely say you’ve repented without doing anything. Because the Greek word doesn’t just mean changing the way you think. It doesn’t just mean feeling bad about the past things you’ve done. It doesn’t just mean having remorse when you sin. And it doesn’t just mean confessing your sins. *Repentance* means fundamentally changing the way you think about life, which leads to fundamentally changing the way you live your life. That is the full meaning of the word. So, if you’re just changing the way you think and you’re just believing in Jesus, but it’s not fundamentally changing your lifestyle, then you haven’t repented. And if you haven’t repented, then you haven’t even taken the first step in following Jesus.

Following Jesus requires repentance. And, *repentance* means everything about your life changes. You stop doing what you were once doing, and you start to do something different. Your thoughts on life change, and therefore your actions change. What you care about changes, and therefore what you do with your life changes.

John the Baptist’s entire message was repentance. If you want to understand what it means to repent, look at what John taught. Luke explained that John’s message was a message of action – not just feelings, not just remorse, and not just confessing.

John said, “Do the things that prove your repentance. Don’t begin to say to yourselves, ‘Abraham is our father.’ For I tell you that God could raise up children for Abraham from these rocks. The ax is now ready to cut down the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’ The people asked John, ‘Then what should we do?’ John answered, ‘If you have two shirts, share with the person who does not have one. If you have food, share that also.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:8-11

John was telling the people to change their actions – to do the things that proved their repentance. When the people asked him what they should do to prove their repentance, he didn't say, "confess." He didn't say, "feel remorse." He also didn't say, "believe in God." He said, "if you have two shirts, give to the person who doesn't have any. And if you have food, share that also."

Repentance is action.

A lot of Christians get this mindset that repentance is about just *not doing bad things*. Many Christians focus so much on just trying to not cuss, trying to not get drunk, trying to not watch bad movies, trying to not sleep around, trying to not get angry, trying to not lie, trying to not cheat, trying to not... whatever! We focus on the things we're *not* supposed to do... but that's not what John said! He said true repentance is if you have two shirts, then you give to the person who has none. If you have food, then you share that also. True repentance is when you stop thinking about yourself, and you start thinking about others. That's the fundamental change in thinking. And it results in a fundamental change of action – you stop doing what's best for yourself, and you start doing what's best for others.

If you spend your life focusing on the things you're *not* supposed to do, trying to not do those things, then you're still thinking about yourself. You haven't started thinking about others – you're still consumed with yourself. That's what the Pharisees did. They prided themselves on how they didn't do the bad things they weren't supposed to do – but meanwhile, they neglected to do the things they were supposed to be doing.

Repentance isn't just about not doing the things that are wrong. Repentance is about beginning to do the things that are right. It's about changing the way you think and changing the way you live. True repentance is when you stop thinking about yourself, and you start to think about others. It's action – not just inaction.

That's what *repentance* means. It's *doing something*. Not just *not doing something*.

So, with John the Baptist's definition of *repentance* in mind, ask yourself: Do I own more than I need to survive? Do I have excess? Because, according to John, true repentance means you don't keep your excess for yourself. You don't hold onto more than you need.

So many Christians are trying to enter through the narrow gate while holding onto more than they need. They're trying to hold onto a certain standard of living. They're trying to pursue the American dream. They have two shirts, and they're buying another. They have food, and they're going out to eat. Their focus isn't on what's best for others, and their actions aren't in line with what John taught about repentance.

John didn’t teach, “share with others sometimes.” He taught, “if you have more than you need, then give the extra to those who don’t have enough.”

According to John, true repentance is when you start looking out for the needs of others. It’s when you start using your resources to help others rather than holding onto them for yourself. Keep this in mind as you continue through the rest of this book.

The first step in following Jesus is to repent. And John the Baptist, the foremost expert on repentance, said that true repentance is when you give your excess to others and look out for their good instead of your own.

That message will prove to be a major theme throughout the rest of Scripture.

So, as we’ve seen, repentance is an essential part of salvation. John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus by preaching repentance. Jesus came, preaching repentance. Peter preached repentance. Paul preached repentance. And *repentance*, as defined in Ancient Greek, as well as by John the Baptist, is when you change the way you’re living – you do what’s best for others, not what’s best for yourself. Repentance is about having action – good works. It’s about doing something.

And it’s required for salvation.

Paul said that we’re saved by faith and not by works. But just because you don’t understand how that fits with repentance doesn’t mean repentance is not important! It just means you don’t understand yet. Paul also said that his gospel message was summarized in “telling people that they should repent and do works to show they really had changed.”<sup>1</sup>

So, instead of just ignoring some of the puzzle pieces, Christians need to start asking hard questions. The Lord will teach those who ask. But if we just ignore those questions, then we’re ignoring step one in following Jesus. Jesus said we should be trying hard to enter through the narrow gate. We’re not trying hard if we just ignore what the Bible says it means to repent. And we’re not trying hard if we just ignore the fact that the Bible says works are required.

If you try to enter without having good works, and you come to Jesus on judgment day, calling him “Lord,” but you haven’t repented, he’s going to say, “I never knew you.”

How do I know? Because he said, “Not all those who say to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:20

Father in heaven wants.”<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what God wants will be allowed to enter. Why? Because repentance is important. That is what Jesus’ point is. You must actually obey. If you’re not obeying him, then you won’t be allowed to enter. In fact, right after he said this, he continued, saying, “Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a stupid man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house, and it fell with a big crash.”<sup>2</sup>

I grew up in the Church. I heard this parable thousands of times. I sang this parable in children’s songs. I listened to sermons about this parable. I read books that addressed this parable. You know what I never noticed? This parable is not comparing those who believe in Jesus with those who do not believe in Jesus. It’s not comparing Christians to non-Christians. No – this parable is comparing two different types of people who both hear the teaching of Jesus. The only thing that separated the wise man from the foolish man is that the wise man obeyed Jesus, and the foolish man did not obey.

It’s a parable about action. It’s all about whether you’re doing what he said to do.

So, in Matthew 7, when Jesus warned us about the narrow road and the wide road, he immediately followed that up with three different examples of people who think they’re Christians, but they don’t have the correct actions – the first example is the false prophets and false teachers who can be identified by their fruit, the second example is the throngs of people who prophesy, cast out demons, work miracles, and call Jesus “Lord,” but don’t do what God wants, and the third example is the wise man and the foolish man who either did or did not obey the commands of Jesus.

Therefore, based on the context, Jesus’ warning about the wide road and the narrow road is a warning about thinking you’re a Christian even though you’re not living the life God wants you to live. It’s not a cute little verse saying that Christianity is the only way to go to heaven, and everyone who believes in a different religion will go to destruction. No – it’s a warning that many people will think they’re Christians and still not be able to enter – and it will all be based on what they did or didn’t do.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:24-27

When Jesus said, “Try hard to enter through the narrow door,”<sup>1</sup> it’s largely about whether you’ve repented. Or in other words, it’s about whether you’ve changed – changed the way you think and changed the way you act. Are you doing the right things? Or are you neglecting what God wants you to do? Here is the context of what he said in Luke’s account:

“Try hard to enter through the narrow door, because many people will try to enter there, but they will not be able. When the owner of the house gets up and closes the door, you can stand outside and say, ‘Lord, open the door for us.’ But he will answer, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from.’ Then you will say, ‘We ate and drank with you, and you taught in the streets of our town.’ But he will say to you, ‘I don’t know you or where you come from. Go away from me, all you who do evil!’ You will cry and grind your teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the prophets in God’s kingdom, but you yourselves thrown outside.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, we see a warning about a narrow gate. Again, we see people calling Jesus “Lord.” Again, we see Jesus telling those people, “I don’t know you.” Again, those people were those who had the teaching of Jesus. Again, Jesus told them to depart from him. And again, Jesus said those people did what was evil.

Matthew and Luke were both saying the same thing – the narrow road and the wide road are both full of Christians. They’re both full of people who confess with their mouths that Jesus is Lord and who believe in their hearts that God raised him from the dead. They’re both full of people who believe in Jesus.

The only difference between those on the narrow road and those on the wide road is whether they did what God wants. The difference is whether they obeyed or not.

Jesus was saying it’s going to come down to what you *do*. If you believe in him, but you don’t follow him and obey him, then he doesn’t know you. If you call him “Lord,” and believe that he rose from the dead, and put your trust in him, and have faith in him, but you don’t obey what he said to do, then he will send you away from him and you will fail to enter.

That’s why he said to try hard to enter. That’s why Peter said to put some effort into it.

It’s not about what you believe. It’s about what you do.

Just because you don’t understand how this is compatible with what Paul said doesn’t mean you can just brush this under the rug. But that’s what many Christians do! Because they don’t understand how to make repentance

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 13:24

<sup>2</sup> Luke 13:24-28

and faith fit together, they push the repentance and the works to the side, and they preach that salvation is all dependent on faith. They follow the teaching of the Reformers, pulling verses out of context, ignoring others that contradict their conclusions, and they hold firm to the belief that they can be saved apart from works.

But that's not what Scripture says.

You must repent. And *repentance* means you change the way you live. Repentance means you begin to live the way God says is right. It means you begin to obey what Jesus said to do. It means your entire life changes. It's not just about remorse, feelings, or confession. It's not just about *not doing bad things*. It's not just about doing a few good deeds here or there.

It's when everything changes. Your thoughts on life change, and your actions follow. Your lifestyle changes. Your goals change. Your priorities change.

It's radical. It's extreme. It's extraordinary.

Ask yourself: Have you repented?

Do you do the things Jesus said to do?

Do you take Jesus seriously or not? Do you think you're supposed to obey him or not?

Have you ever paid attention to the practical instructions he gave?

Do you realize that most of what he taught was literal, practical action?

Everything in my life changed when I took a red pen and I underlined every single practical command or instruction in the New Testament, and I made up my mind to do what it said. If you're looking for a first step in how to repent, that's a good way to start.

What is more important to you – having eternal life, or holding to the doctrine and theology you were taught by men? Jesus said you can call him “Lord,” and believe in him enough to prophesy, cast out demons, and do miracles, yet still fail to enter. He said you should try hard to enter. He said only those who obey him will enter. He said only those who do what God wants will enter.

It's all right there, in the Bible!

Do you take it seriously? Doesn't it at least scare you enough to go check it for yourself? Or are you going to just stubbornly and dogmatically hold onto what you were taught by men – even though the Bible clearly warned you that false teachers would rise up and lead many into destruction? That same stubbornness is the reason the Pharisees rejected Jesus.

This is your eternal soul we're talking about. Jesus warned you that

many will call him Lord and still not enter. They will see him, they will be excited, they will think he is their Lord, they will expect to hear, “well done, good and faithful servant,” but instead they will be shocked to hear, “I never knew you. Get out!”

Do you really want to risk being one of those people?

Repentance is required for life. Go learn what that means.

Throughout much of this book, we’re going to look at what it means, practically, to repent. Or in other words, what does it mean to do what the Father in heaven wants? What does it practically mean to be the wise man who hears the teaching of Jesus and obeys it? What sort of action is Jesus looking for? What sort of good fruit should we bear in our lives?

We can see a hint of it in what John the Baptist taught about repentance. We’ll look at how his teaching matches perfectly with what Jesus, the apostles, and the whole Old Testament taught.

But before we can look at some of the practical things Jesus wants us to do, we need to make sure we address some of the basics.

Because we live in a Christian culture that is heavily influenced by Protestant teaching, a lot of people might be very confused as to how *repentance* and *faith* both fit together in the same puzzle.

A lot of Christians right now might be thinking, “Wait a minute. How is this not legalism? How is this not relying on works? We’re saved by faith, not by works.”

We’re going to get into that in the next few chapters. In the next chapter, we’re going to look at faith, and how faith fits with repentance. Furthermore, we’re going to address what *faith* means according to Scripture, and what it meant in Ancient Greek.

Paul wrote that we’re saved by faith, and not by works. But he also summarized his message by saying that he preached that people must have works that prove their repentance. Somehow these two messages are actually the same exact message. We can’t just focus on one, while ignoring the other.

So, we will begin to look at *faith* in the next chapter.

“But God’s strong foundation continues to stand, sealed with these words: ‘The Lord knows those who belong to him,’ and, ‘Everyone who wants to belong to the Lord must stop doing wrong.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 2:19



## DEAD CHURCH

“My true brother and sister and mother are those who do what my Father in heaven wants.”<sup>1</sup>

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but do not do what I say?”<sup>2</sup>

“Blessed are those who hear the teaching of God and obey it.”<sup>3</sup>

“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”<sup>4</sup>

“Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me...”<sup>5</sup>

“If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”<sup>6</sup>

“We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 12:50

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:46

<sup>3</sup> Luke 11:28

<sup>4</sup> John 14:15

<sup>5</sup> John 14:21

<sup>6</sup> John 14:23

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 2:3-4

# Chapter 4

## Faith Doesn't Mean Belief

As we've seen, repentance is essential for salvation. The first step in becoming a Christian is to repent – and *repenting* means changing the way you think and changing the way you live. It means your actions change.

Jesus said, “Not all those who say to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, it's not enough to just believe in him and call him “Lord.” According to Jesus, we must be people who do the things God wants us to do. We must have works.

Paul summarized the message he preached by saying, “I began telling people that they should repent and do works to show they really had changed. I told this first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem, and all throughout the countryside of Judea, and also to the Gentiles.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul's summary of his own message was that he taught people to “repent and do works.”

So, before we can look at what those works should be, we need to understand how this message is compatible with the message of faith. After all, Paul also said, “You have been saved by grace through faith. You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. It was not the result of works, so you cannot brag about it.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul also said, “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law has been revealed, a way testified by the law and the prophets. This righteousness comes through their faith in Jesus Christ. This is true for all who believe in Christ, because there is no distinction. Everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard, and all need to be made right with God as a free gift by his grace, through the redemption that is in Jesus Christ. God appointed him as a sacrifice of atonement. We receive forgiveness through faith in his blood...”<sup>4</sup>

In these verses, Paul was saying we are saved by grace through faith, and it's not a result of works. Most Christians are familiar with these verses. Most Christians have been taught these verses their whole lives. These verses are some of the foundational verses for the whole of Protestantism. The

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>2</sup> Acts 26:20

<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>4</sup> Romans 3:23-25

Protestant Reformation was built on the idea that we are saved entirely by faith, and that works are not required. These verses (and some others) are used to support this teaching.

The problem is that these verses don't stand alone. The same man who wrote these verses also summarized his message by saying that he taught people to "repent and do works." We can't just ignore that. We need to know how the message of "faith, not works" is the same message as "repent and do works."

The modern Protestant understanding of "faith, not works" is not compatible with the message of repentance as preached by John the Baptist, Jesus, Peter, and Paul. The Church tells us that our salvation is based entirely on whether we believe that Jesus is who he said he is. The Church tells us that the path to salvation is to confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, and to believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead.

But Jesus said many will call him "Lord," and they'll spend their lives doing things that prove that they believe he was raised from the dead, yet he will still turn them away on judgment day. He said that he will turn them away because they didn't do what God wants – they didn't obey his commands. They didn't have works.<sup>1</sup>

How do these two messages fit together? How could Paul clearly say, "you have been saved by grace through faith... it was not the result of works,"<sup>2</sup> and then summarize this same message by saying, "I began telling people that they should repent and do works..."<sup>3</sup>?

How could Jesus teach, "whoever believes in [me] may not perish, but have eternal life,"<sup>4</sup> and then say, "Not all those who say to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven..."<sup>5</sup>?

These verses seem to contradict each other. These verses don't seem compatible. It seems like Paul was clearly saying one thing at one time, but then the exact opposite at another time. It seems like Jesus clearly said that we're saved by believing in him, but then turned around and said that maybe we're not.

Are we saved by works, or are we saved by faith? Despite what many Protestant teachers might tell you, there's a strong case to be made for *both* sides of the argument – not just their own side.

Why does the Bible seem to teach both *works* and *faith*? Why is it that two messages, both found in the New Testament, seem so incompatible? And

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:13-27

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Acts 26:20

<sup>4</sup> John 3:16

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 7:21

how could Paul act like these two messages are the same message?

The reason these two messages seem so incompatible is because of our understanding of *faith*. Most Christians read the word *faith* in the Bible and just assume they know what it means. They've heard countless sermons on faith. They've read books about faith. They've talked about faith. They don't even recognize that they're reading Protestant theology into the text because they don't realize that they're using the modern, Protestant definition of the word *faith*.

In other words, they're wearing those glasses again. They're wearing red-colored glasses that distort everything they're reading – and they don't even realize it! They read the Bible, but they end up thinking it says the exact opposite of what it actually says because they brought their own ideas with them when they approached Scripture. They brought the sermons they've heard. They brought the books they've read. They brought the songs they've sung. They brought the things they've been taught.

They didn't start with Scripture and Scripture alone. And they didn't let Scripture define its own terms.

When reading the Bible, you'll find that the word *faith* occurs repeatedly throughout the New Testament. Paul said we're saved by faith, Jesus said we must have faith, and Jesus taught that we must have faith for our prayers to be answered.

Here is what the word *faith* means in English:

- 1) *Complete trust or confidence in someone or something.*
- 2) *Strong belief in God or in the doctrines of a religion based on spiritual apprehension rather than proof.*
- 3) *A system of religious belief, a strongly held belief or theory.*<sup>1</sup>

When we looked up *repentance* in the last chapter, we saw that the word in English means *remorse or regret*, but that's not necessarily how everyone uses it. People often mean different things because it's a word we're not familiar with. We don't use it outside of Christianity. However, the definition of the word *faith* really is how we use it! It's belief. It's trust. It's confidence.

But here's the thing: Your Bible was not originally written in English. Scripture was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Most of it was written in Hebrew and Greek. The New Testament, where it most directly teaches about faith, was written in Greek. In the New Testament, the word *faith* is the Greek word *πίστις* (*pístis*). Therefore, we must match our understanding of the word *faith* with the Ancient Greek understanding of the word *pístis*. If our idea

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/faith>, retrieved July, 2020

of what it means to have *faith* is different than the Ancient Greek idea of what it means to have *pístis*, then we're going to think the Bible is saying something that it's not saying.

The word *pístis* does mean *faith*. It means *trust*, *confidence* and *belief*... but it means more than just *faith*. It means more than just *trusting*. It means more than just *having confidence*. It means more than just *believing*.

The literal definition of *pístis* is *persuasion*.

However, when it comes to language, it's not enough to just know the "dictionary definition" of a word. We need to know how that word was used in the culture.

When the Bible was written, the word *pístis* was a common word used in everyday conversation. It was a word with an entire concept behind it that everyone understood. We need to know how they would have understood the word *pístis*. When Paul wrote to people, telling them that they were saved by *pístis*, we need to know what they would have thought he meant – not what we think he meant when we read it in English. We need to understand how the original audience would have understood it.

The New Testament was written in the time of the Roman Empire. At that time, the word *pístis* was used to mean more than just *faith*, *trust*, and *belief*. It was also used to mean *faithfulness*. To be more exact, the word *pístis* wasn't a word that sometimes meant *faith*, and other times meant *faithfulness*. It wasn't a word in which the context would change whether it meant *faith* or *faithfulness*. No, it was a word that communicated a concept – a concept which always included both *faith* and *faithfulness* at the same time. It always communicated both *faith* and *faithfulness* together, at the same time, as the relationship that existed between two parties.

In fact, *pístis* was more than just a Greek word. *Pístis* described a concept that was so widely understood throughout the culture that it had its own character in Greek mythology. In Greek mythology, *Pístis* was a person – the personification of an idea – a concept. But, *Pístis* wasn't the personification of faith and belief, as the modern Church interprets it to mean. *Pístis* was the personification of good faith, trust, and reliability.

As is typical with mythology, Rome had their own equivalent of *Pístis*. In Roman mythology, *Pístis* went by the name of *Fidēs*. *Fidēs* was the goddess of trust and good faith. *Fidēs* was everything that was required for "honour and credibility, from fidelity in marriage, to contractual arrangements, and the obligation soldiers owed to Rome."<sup>1</sup> *Fidēs*, just like her Greek counterpart *Pístis*, meant reliability. It referred to a reliability that existed between two

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<sup>1</sup> Perley, Sara. "Fides Romana: Aspects of fides in Roman diplomatic relations during the conquest of Iberia" (PDF). University of Otago. Retrieved 15 May 2019

different parties. Furthermore, that reliability was always two-sided. Or in other words, both parties were reliable to one another. *Fidēs* was the Latin translation of the Greek word *pístis*, and it is the Latin root of our English word, *fidelity*.

So, *pístis* didn't mean you simply believe something. It didn't mean you merely trust someone. It didn't mean you're convinced that something is true. *Pístis* meant loyalty. It meant good faith. It meant fidelity. It meant reliability. It meant you both trust someone (faith), and you are also loyal to that person (faithfulness) at the same time. It never meant just faith, and it never meant just faithfulness. It always meant both at the same time.

As I mentioned earlier, *pístis* most literally means *persuasion*. However, in English, we think of *persuasion* as a matter of what we believe – what we think, and what we consider to be true. But in Greek, it meant more than that. The word *pístis* came from the root word, *πειθω* (*peíthō*), which meant, *to convince* or *to persuade*. However, *peíthō* was used to convey more than what a person believed. For example, the Greek word, *πειθαρχέω* (*peitharcheó*) was a combination of two words: *peíthō* and *archón* – *peíthō*, meaning *to persuade*, and *archón*, meaning *a ruler*. Therefore, *peitharcheó* meant, *to be persuaded by a ruler*. Translated, it meant *to obey* or *to submit*.

For example, Peter used the word *peitharcheó* when he said, “We must obey God, not people!”<sup>1</sup> The *persuasion* of *peíthō* was a persuasion to act – a persuasion to submit. *Peíthō* meant *to persuade someone to do something* – not just *to persuade someone to believe something*. Therefore, *pístis*, which also came from the word *peíthō*, did not mean *persuasion* as in *belief*. It meant *persuasion* as in *persuasion to act* or *persuasion to do something*. It meant that someone was persuaded to cooperate. They were persuaded to obey. They were persuaded to become faithful. It meant that a person was convinced of something, therefore they acted accordingly. It included both belief and action.

The reason it is translated as *faith* is because *faith* can technically mean the same thing... but no one thinks of it that way. For example, if I have a “good-faith” agreement with someone, what does it mean? It means we both trust each other and we will both be faithful to each other. Or, if you go to the bank, you will see a little sign that says your money is backed by the “full faith of the United States government.” What is it promising? Is it promising that your money is backed by the full *belief* of the United States government? No – it's promising that your money is backed by the faithfulness and trustworthiness of the United States government. Both parties are persuaded to cooperate.

This is the kind of faith the Bible is talking about. It doesn't mean just

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 5:29

*belief*. It means *believing* and *obeying* at the same time. It means loyalty. It means fidelity. It means reliability. If you have full confidence, trust, and belief, but you yourself are not faithful, reliable, and obedient, then you don't have *pístis* – you don't have faith. You haven't been persuaded to obey.

*Pístis* is a concept closely related to marriage. I both trust my wife that she will be faithful to me, and I am faithful to her, so she trusts me. We have fidelity to one another. We keep faith with one another. We have *pístis*.

Here are a few examples of how the word *pístis* was used outside of the New Testament:

Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived at the same time as the apostles, used the word *pístis* in some of his writing. He said, “Now the multitude of the Galileans had that great kindness for me, and *fidelity* to me, that when their cities were taken by force, and their wives and children carried into slavery, they did not so deeply lament for their own calamities, as they were solicitous for my preservation.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the people from Galilee had fidelity (*pístis*) toward Josephus – to the point where they wanted him kept safe even in the midst of their own cities being attacked and their own families being carried away as prisoners. Their *pístis* toward Josephus wasn't that they believed he existed or merely trusted him. Their *pístis* was shown in that they were faithful to him.

Josephus also said, “But when John was come to the city of Tiberias, he persuaded the men to revolt from their *fidelity* to me, and to adhere to him...”<sup>2</sup>

“...I would forgive him what he had done already, if he would repent of it, and be *faithful* to me hereafter.”<sup>3</sup>

Here, we can see Josephus using the word *pístis* to clearly refer to a person's loyalties – not to what that person believes or who that person trusts.

Here are some other examples:

“And now continue you still to keep *faith* with us, and we will recompense to you good things in return for your dealings with us, and will grant you many immunities, and give you gifts.”<sup>4</sup>

Here, in 1 Maccabees, the word *pístis* is translated *faith* – but it refers to *keeping faith*. In other words, it is also about loyalty and fidelity. The *pístis* being

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<sup>1</sup> Josephus, *The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 16.84, Josephus – *The Complete Works*, Translated by William Whiston, A.M., Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998, p. 7, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 17.72, p. 7, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 22.110, p. 8, emphasis added

<sup>4</sup> 1 Maccabees 10:27-28, *The Complete Apocrypha*, Covenant Press, 2018, p. 95, emphasis added

displayed is some form of action demonstrating faithfulness, loyalty, and reliability.

“...and the people saw the *faith* of Simon, and the glory which he thought to bring to his nation, and they made him their leader and high priest, because he had done all these things, and for the justice and the *faith* which he kept to his nation, and for that he sought by all means to exalt his people...”<sup>1</sup>

Again, we see that the *pístis* (or *faith*) demonstrated here is not a belief or trust. It is fidelity, loyalty and faithfulness. It's reliability. It is shown through action – not merely believing. Simon kept faith toward his nation – not just faith toward God. He didn't just believe his nation existed. He didn't just trust his nation. He was loyal to his nation. He prioritized them. He took care of them and did what was best for them. His *pístis* was shown in action – it was his loyalty, fidelity, reliability, and faithfulness toward his people.

This is what *faith* means in the Bible. It's not just *faith* – it's *pístis*. We're not supposed to merely believe – we're supposed to believe and obey. We're supposed to be faithful. We're supposed to be reliable. This is why Jesus said when he returns, he will reward those who were “good and faithful” servants, but he would punish those who were unfaithful.<sup>2</sup> We're supposed to be reliable! Jesus is our King, and we are supposed to stay loyal to him. Jesus is our bridegroom, and we are supposed to live in fidelity to him. We aren't called to just believe. We're called to be faithful. We're called to be loyal. We're called to be reliable.

Having faith in Jesus means we trust him, we believe in him, we have confidence in him, *and* we are faithful to him, loyal to him, and obey him. Having faith in Jesus means we keep faith with him. It means he considers us to be reliable. That means we don't betray him. It means we're not unfaithful to him.

Again, our *pístis* toward Jesus is like the fidelity seen between a husband and a wife. If you have a wife who is unfaithful or a husband who is unfaithful, it's someone who is not loyal. They are cheating on you. They are committing adultery. The same is true in our relationship with Jesus.

Consider what James said: “You want things so you can use them for your own pleasures. You adulterers! Don't you know that friendship with the world is the same as hating God? Anyone who wants to be a friend of the world becomes God's enemy. Do you think the Scripture means nothing that says, ‘The Spirit that God made to live in us wants us for himself alone?’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Maccabees 14:35, Ibid, p. 103, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27

<sup>3</sup> James 4:3-5



James said if you want things for your own pleasure, you are unfaithful – you are an unfaithful spouse – you’re an adulterer. The New Testament tells us that Jesus is the Bridegroom, and his people are his Bride. But James said that if you love the world, you are unfaithful – you are an unfaithful Bride – you don’t have faith because you don’t have fidelity.

In other words, if you love the world, you’re cheating on Jesus.

That is what Scripture is talking about when it says that we are saved by faith! When you see the word *faith*, it’s not just belief. It is belief with faithfulness. It is faith and faithfulness. Belief and loyalty. Fidelity. Reliability.

Having faith means you’re clinging to Jesus, and you’re not looking anywhere else. You are not distracted by the world; you are not looking at false gods; you are not wanting things for your own pleasure; you are looking at Jesus and Jesus alone, and he is all you want. He’s all you’re living for. He is everything in your life. He’s not just someone you go and sing to on Sunday; he’s someone you make all your decisions around. You live your entire life in faithfulness to him.

That is what it means when you see the word *faith* in the Bible.

Similarly, when we see the word *believe* in the New Testament, it is almost always the Greek word πιστεύω (*pisteúō*). The word *pisteúō* is simply the verb-form of *pístis*. It simply means *to have pístis*. It is rooted in the word *pístis*, and also carries the concept of loyalty, faithfulness, reliability, and fidelity. In fact, the word *pisteúō* is often also translated as *obey*. It’s interchangeable – because the concept doesn’t mean merely believing – it means both believing and obeying at the same time. If you believe, but you don’t obey, then you don’t *pisteúō*, and you’re not doing what the Bible teaches.

So, in the New Testament, when we’re told to believe in Jesus, we’re really being told to both believe and obey Jesus. When we’re told to put our faith in Jesus, we’re really being told to put our loyalty and fidelity in Jesus. It’s more than just what we believe. It’s how we live. If we say we believe in him, but we don’t do what he wants, then we’re not actually loyal to him. If we say we trust him, but we don’t live the way he told us to live, then we prove we don’t really trust what he said, and we prove that we’re not faithful. If we say we have faith in him, but our lives don’t match the kind of lifestyle taught by him and the apostles, then we prove we’re really divided – we don’t have fidelity.

This is how repentance and faith fit together. The first step in following Jesus is to repent – or, to change how we’re living and become faithful and loyal to Jesus. Repentance means we stop doing what we used to do, and we start doing something else. That *something else* is faith – it’s becoming loyal to Jesus, it’s joining ourselves to him in fidelity and living for him and obeying him as our King and Bridegroom.

So, when Paul told us that we're saved by faith, not works, what he was really saying was that we're saved by loyalty and fidelity – not just by following a huge list of rules. He was saying it was about having a heart that *wants* to do what pleases God – not just doing what the Law says, even though we don't really want to. However, as Paul said, the way of faith still upholds the Law<sup>1</sup> – because faith is about loyalty to God, not just believing.

When God promised the New Covenant, he promised that he would write the Law on our hearts.<sup>2</sup> That didn't mean he was going to abolish the Law. That meant he would make us into people who *want* to do what is right. He would make us people who are faithful to him from the heart, and who live in fidelity to him because we want to – not just because we want to avoid going to Hell.

This is the kind of faith that saves us. It's loyalty to God. It's obeying him because we love him and want to obey him – not where we're just forcing ourselves to follow all the rules in the Law. God provided a way for us to become people who want to do what is right – a way for us to become loyal and faithful to him. Paul said, “[Jesus] gave himself for us so he might ransom us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>3</sup>

This is saving faith. It's when we become people who want to do good deeds. It's when we become people who want to live the way God says is right. When the Bible says we were ransomed from all wickedness, it is not just saying that we don't have a penalty for sin. It is saying that we are ransomed from continuing to be wicked people. We're ransomed from continuing to do wicked things. We become people who want to do good deeds. We become people who are faithful to God and obey him out of fidelity, loyalty, and love. We're not merely ransomed from the penalty of wickedness – we're ransomed from the wickedness itself. Paul also said, “Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>4</sup>

Our saving faith is that we no longer live for ourselves. Our saving faith is our faithfulness to God. Our saving faith is our fidelity – where we live for Jesus without distraction and without being divided.

Paul preached, “...you have been saved by grace through faith. You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. It was not the result of works, so no one can brag about it.”<sup>5</sup> But then he turned around and summarized this

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 3:31

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 31:33

<sup>3</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

same message by saying, “I began telling people that they should repent and do works to show they really had changed.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason these two messages are actually the same message is because *faith* doesn’t mean *belief*. When Paul taught, “repent and do works,” he was teaching, “repent and have *pístis*.” Faith means you have God’s Law written on your heart, so now you want to do what is right, you live for God, and you obey him because you naturally want to do good. So, when Paul said that we’re saved by faith, he was saying that we’re saved by being changed and doing works that prove we’ve changed – the exact same thing he told King Agrippa!

If you believe in Jesus, but you don’t live the kind of life he taught us to live, then you prove through your actions that you haven’t changed. And if you haven’t changed, then you don’t have faith – you don’t have loyalty, you don’t have fidelity. If you haven’t changed, then you’re still under the Law, because the Law was intended for sinners<sup>2</sup> – it was given to people who don’t naturally want to do good deeds. The Law was given as rules to teach people what is right.<sup>3</sup> But true life comes through fidelity to God, where we naturally do what the Law was teaching because of our love and faithfulness to God. Jesus came to make us people who want to do what is right. Our faith is that fidelity.

We’re not saved by belief. We’re saved by *pístis*. We’re saved by being transformed and becoming new people – people who always want to do what is right. This is why Jesus said, “Truly, truly I say to you, unless you are born again, you cannot experience God’s kingdom.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus didn’t say, “truly, truly I say to you, unless you really believe you cannot experience God’s kingdom.” He said, “unless you’re born again.” Because you have to be transformed. You have to receive the Law written on your heart. You have to stop being someone who is wicked – you have to be ransomed from that wickedness and become someone who always wants to do good deeds, someone who no longer lives for yourself, but you live for him who died for you and was raised from the dead.

Our actions prove our fidelity. If we say we have faith in Jesus, but we don’t have works, then we don’t have faith.

So, now that we see what the Greek word meant, let’s look at what Scripture teaches about faith. It’s one thing to see how a Greek word was used in the culture, but how do we know that that concept is really what was

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:20

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 1:9-11

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Galatians 3:24-25

<sup>4</sup> John 3:3

intended throughout the New Testament?

When we read the word *faith* in the New Testament, it's easy to think it means *belief* even when we understand what the Greek word meant. It's easy because we've been trained to think of it that way, and it's hard to undo many years of teaching. So now let's look at what the New Testament teaches about faith – because we will quickly find that the New Testament teaches the same concept of fidelity, loyalty, reliability, and faithfulness. The New Testament clearly teaches that faith is not merely belief. Faith is action.

Before I ever learned what the Greek word meant, I saw that Scripture said something about faith that didn't match up with what I'd heard the Church teach. I didn't know the Greek, and I hadn't studied the Greek, but I saw inconsistencies in the English translations of the Bible. It became clear to me – using only the English translations – that something was wrong with my understanding of what it means to have faith. The Bible teaches what faith is – whether you know Greek or not.

If you've spent some time in the Church, and if you read your Bible a lot, and someone were to ask you, "What does *faith* mean?" Where would you turn in Scripture? What part of the Bible would you reference as you explain what *faith* is?

Almost every Christian would turn to the same exact verse:

"Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."<sup>1</sup>

Here's the problem:

When we turn to Hebrews 11:1 as the answer to our question, we treat it as a sort of "dictionary definition" of the term. We treat it as if the writer were Webster, and as if the verse reads:

Faith (n.)

1. The assurance of things hoped for
2. The conviction of things not seen

But that's not what this verse means.

The first problem is that the word translated as *assurance* could be translated *guarantee*. And the word translated as *conviction* could be translated *proof* or *evidence*. Or in other words, "faith is the guarantee of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen."

The writer wasn't defining *faith*. He was saying that we can know that we will receive what we hope for *if* we have faith. Faith isn't some feeling of

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:1 (ESV)

assurance we have... faith is the proof that gives us assurance. If we have faith – or, if we have that changed heart of fidelity – then, we know we will receive what we hope for. We have proof that we have been changed – proof that we’ve been born again.

This verse is not a definition. This verse is promising us that if we have faith, we can know we will receive our inheritance.

The second problem is that we’re only turning to one single verse. The entire New Testament teaches about faith from the beginning to the end, but we turn to one single verse to tell us what faith means. More than that, we pick this verse completely out of context! This verse doesn’t stand by itself – this verse has a context. And the context of this verse is explaining what it means to have faith.

Taking a verse out of context is something we should never do. But the writer of Hebrews even specifically said, “My brothers and sisters, I urge you to listen patiently to this message I have written to encourage you, because it is not very long.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, he was saying to listen to the whole thing – it’s not a long letter. Don’t break this letter down into little pieces or you’re going to miss the point. Read the whole thing.

Yet, instead of doing what the writer asked, we pick it apart and we read one chapter at a time (or sometimes even less). We don’t read Scripture the way we’re supposed to. Hebrews 11:1 was never meant to stand alone. The context tells us that faith is more than just having a confidence in your mind. If we back up just a few verses, we see that he was not just telling them, “You need to really trust God,” he was telling them, “You need to live the way you used to live when you first came to faith.”

He said, “Remember those early days of your faith when you first learned the truth. You persevered through a hard struggle with many sufferings. Sometimes you were hurt and attacked before crowds of people, and sometimes you shared with those who were being treated that way. You suffered with the prisoners. You even had joy when all that you owned was taken from you, because you knew you had something better and more lasting. So do not throw away your confident trust in God, which has a great reward. You must persevere, so you can do the will of God and receive what he has promised. For in a very short time, ‘The One who is coming will come and will not delay. Those who are right with me will live by faith. But if they turn back with fear, I will not be pleased with them.’ But we are not those who turn back and are destroyed. We are people who have faith and are saved.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 13:22

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 10:32-39

Then comes Hebrews 11:1.

The writer of Hebrews was not suddenly defining faith as some dictionary definition. No, he was telling them they need to get back to this radical life they used to have in the early days. He was telling them to return to how they used to live when they persevered through suffering and shared with others who were being persecuted. He was telling them to go back to living a life where they suffered with those who were prisoners and responded with joy when everything they owned was taken from them.

He said, “so do not throw away your confident trust in God, which has a great reward. You must persevere...” That’s faith. It’s trust *and* perseverance. It’s trust *and* obedience. It’s trust *and* it’s living the radical lifestyle that the writer of Hebrews had just explained.

In other words, he was telling them to return to action. He was telling them to keep living a radical lifestyle *because* those who are right with God will live by faith. They needed to return to their radical lifestyle because that’s the only way to be right with God – that radical lifestyle is what it *means* to live by faith. But, if they were to shrink back or turn back, and not keep living that radical lifestyle, God would not be pleased with them. Why? Because those who are right with him will live by faith. If someone doesn’t live that radical lifestyle, God is not pleased with them because they don’t have faith.

That’s the context. It’s more than just belief. It’s a lifestyle. That’s what faith is.

If we continue through Hebrews 11, we can see that he gave example after example of people who lived by faith – and every single one of them demonstrated their faith through their actions. None of them had a faith that was merely belief. Every single person had a faith that transformed their entire life – a faith that proved they were loyal to God and served him with fidelity.

He wrote about Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, and Rahab. Then he summarized the lives of all these other people who suffered – the prophets, and others who came and lived crazy lives, obeying God and suffering for him. The thing that stood out about each of them is what they did – not what they believed. Their faith was defined by action.

The point of Hebrews 11 is to show us that all these people lived with the same kind of fidelity and loyalty he was telling his audience to have at the end of chapter 10. He was saying, “This is what faith is! This is what faith looks like! Notice how none of these people gave up! None of them shrank back! Do what they did!”

Finally, after talking about this for an entire chapter, he said, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, let us run

the race that is before us and never give up...”<sup>1</sup>

When he called these people a “great cloud of witnesses,” many Christians think he was saying that all these people are now up in Heaven, watching us – witnessing what we do.

But that’s not what he was saying.

The word *witnesses* doesn’t mean that they are in heaven watching us. No – it meant they are witnesses standing on a witness stand to testify. He was saying, “We are surrounded by all these stories of all these people whose lives testify to us what faith really means, and how God responds to it – so let’s not give up.” Those people are witnesses. They show what real faith is, and they show how God responds to real faith. So, we should be like them – not just in what we believe, but in how we live our lives.

Hebrews 11 is all about people whose faith was demonstrated in action. It was faith and faithfulness; not just belief. They proved their loyalty and fidelity by living the kinds of lives that God wants – without giving up. Their faith was not merely that they believed and trusted God. Their faith was that they lived in obedience to God without wavering.

The clearest example of this kind of faith is Abraham. Abraham is repeatedly held up in the New Testament as the father of faith. We’re supposed to have faith like Abraham. We can see this clearly in the book of Romans. Paul said, “So people receive God’s promise by having faith. This happens so the promise can be a free gift. Then all of Abraham’s descendants can be guaranteed that promise. It is not only for those who live under the Law of Moses but for anyone who lives with faith like that of Abraham, who is the father of us all.”<sup>2</sup>

If we have faith like that of Abraham, then we can be saved. This concept is something the Church talks about all the time. We know we’re supposed to have faith, and we know that our faith is supposed to be like Abraham’s faith. But what did Abraham’s faith look like?

“Though there was no hope that Abraham would have children, Abraham believed God and continued hoping, and so he became the father of many nations. As God told him, ‘Your descendants also will be too many to count.’ Abraham was almost a hundred years old, much past the age for having children, and Sarah could not have children. Abraham acknowledged this, but his faith in God did not become weak. He never doubted or stopped believing that God would keep his promise. He grew stronger in his faith, and gave glory to God. Abraham was fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. So, ‘God accepted Abraham’s faith, and that faith made him right

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Romans 4:16

with God.' Those words, 'God accepted Abraham's faith,' were written not only for Abraham but also for us. God will accept us also because we believe in the One who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, Paul was teaching that we are saved when we have faith like Abraham's faith. And he referenced the time when God promised Abraham that he would have descendants – so many descendants that they would be too many to count. Abraham believed God, and his faith was counted as righteousness.

But here's the thing: In this passage, Paul didn't go into detail about what that faith looked like. He didn't elaborate on it. If we take this passage by itself (which the Church does!), we would think that Abraham's faith was simply the fact that he believed. But that's not all it was. In Hebrews 11, Abraham's faith is explained in more detail.

When God told Abraham that he was going to give him many descendants – so many that it would be too many to count – he told him to leave his family, leave his homeland, and go to another land where he would give him those descendants...

"It was by faith Abraham obeyed God's call to go to another place God promised to give him. He left his own country, not knowing where he was to go. It was by faith that he lived like a foreigner in the country God promised to give him. He lived in tents with Isaac and Jacob, who had received that same promise from God. Abraham was waiting for the city that has real foundations – the city planned and built by God. He was too old to have children, and Sarah could not have children. It was by faith that Abraham was made able to become a father, because he considered God trustworthy to do what he had promised. This man was so old he was as good as dead, but from him came as many descendants as there are stars in the sky. Like the sand on the seashore, they could not be counted."<sup>2</sup>

Abraham's faith was not just that he believed God. God had told him, "I'm going to give you many descendants – so go live in this land."

Abraham knew that he was old. As Paul said, Abraham acknowledged that he didn't have any kids, that he was old, and that his wife was barren. But that didn't stop him. He packed his bags and he moved.

That was the full picture of his faith. He didn't just believe that God would do what he said. He obeyed. He acted on it. His faith had action. His faith had loyalty. He trusted God *and* he obeyed God. He was reliable. If Abraham hadn't packed his bags and moved, leaving his family and everything he'd ever known behind, then he would not be an example of faith today. If

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 4:18-24

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 11:8-12



he hadn't chosen to follow God and obey God, then no one would have commended him for his faith. His faith was that he trusted God *and* was faithful to God.

That's the full picture of Abraham's faith. That's the kind of faith Paul was talking about in Romans. It's not just *believing*. It's *doing*. Faith includes works.

Furthermore, Hebrews also mentioned Abraham's example of faith when God told him to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice...

"It was by faith that Abraham, when God tested him, offered his son Isaac as a sacrifice. God made the promises to Abraham, but Abraham was ready to offer his own son as a sacrifice. God had said, 'The descendants I promised you will be from Isaac.' Abraham reasoned that God had the power to raise the dead, and in a manner of speaking, it was as if Abraham received Isaac back from death."<sup>1</sup>

When the Church talks about this story, they talk about how Abraham made a great sacrifice – he was willing to lose his only son. But that's not what the Bible says. According to Hebrews, Abraham wasn't ever expecting to lose his son. This test was a test of his faith – did his actions line up with his beliefs? God had promised him that he would have many descendants, and God had promised that those descendants would be through Isaac, and Isaac was still young and didn't have any kids. Abraham believed God would give him descendants through Isaac. But did he trust God enough to obey this command?

Imagine if Abraham had said, "I'm not going to sacrifice Isaac, because I believe God is going to give me descendants through Isaac!" He would have still believed the promise – but his actions would have proven that he didn't have faith. His actions would have shown that he wasn't loyal to God, that he wasn't willing to obey no matter the cost.

But that's not what Abraham did. Abraham thought, "I don't know what's going to happen, but God is going to come through for me because God gave me a promise. So, I'm going to do it."

That was Abraham's faith. It was the combination of faith *and* faithfulness. It was his obedience *and* his trust. He stayed loyal to God despite everything else. His faith included his action.

That's the point of the story. Abraham's faith was not just that he believed God. His faith was that he was willing to do what God asked.

Remember – when Paul wrote that we are saved by having the same kind of faith as Abraham, he was referencing and quoting the Old Testament. Ok, but - what else does the Old Testament say about Abraham's faith? Right

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 11:17-19

after God tested Abraham by telling him to offer Isaac as a sacrifice, and Abraham passed the test, God said to him:

*“Because you did not withhold your son, your only son, from me, I swear by myself: I will surely bless you and give you many descendants. They will be as many as the stars in the sky and the sand on the seashore, and they will capture the cities of their enemies. Through your descendants all the nations on the earth will be blessed, because you obeyed me.”*<sup>1</sup>

So, Paul quoted Genesis where it said that Abraham’s faith was counted as righteousness. But Genesis also said that it was because Abraham *obeyed* God. The Bible says both things – both *faith* and *obedience*! Why? Because they mean the same thing! You can’t have faith without obedience! Abraham obeyed God out of faithfulness and fidelity to him. That is faith.

Later in Genesis, God said to Isaac, “...I will be with you and bless you. I will give you and your descendants all these lands, and I will fulfill the oath I made to Abraham your father. I will give you many descendants, as hard to count as the stars in the sky, and I will give them all these lands. Through your descendants all the nations on the earth will be blessed. *I will do all this because your father Abraham obeyed me. He did what I said and obeyed my instructions, my commands, my teachings, and my rules.*”<sup>2</sup>

Abraham obeyed God’s instructions, his commands, his teachings, and his rules. That is the full picture of Abraham’s faith. Paul quoted Genesis 15:6, which said, “God accepted Abraham’s faith, and that faith made him right with God.”<sup>3</sup> But, Genesis also said that Abraham was right with God and received the promises because Abraham *obeyed* God – he obeyed all his instructions, commands, teachings, and rules. Genesis said both – faith and obedience. Abraham’s saving faith was both belief and obedience. We are saved through the same kind of faith - *pístis*.

As Paul said in Romans 4, we are called to have faith like Abraham – *pístis* like Abraham. Like Abraham, we should be people who obey all of God’s instructions, his commands, his teachings, and his rules. That is what it *means* to have faith like Abraham.

Our faith is the covenant relationship between us and Jesus. It’s our fidelity in marriage to him. It’s our loyalty to him as our King. We can’t have faith in him and not obey him.

Jesus didn’t teach that we’re saved by belief. The apostles didn’t teach that we’re saved by belief. They taught that we are saved by both trusting and being faithful. They taught loyalty. They taught faithfulness. They taught

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 22:16-18, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 26:3-5, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> Romans 4:22

fidelity. They taught reliability. We should be people who obey Jesus without looking any other direction. We should be people who remain faithful to our bridegroom without cheating on him. We are saved by keeping our eyes off the world, keeping our eyes off other gods, keeping our eyes off money, keeping our eyes off possessions, and anything else that would try to get in the way. We are saved by keeping our eyes on Jesus because he is all we want, all we live for, and all we care about.

Many Christians today are quick to say, “Well, that’s trusting works.”

No! That’s faith. That is what the Bible means when it says *faith*. If you don’t have that kind of loyalty to Jesus, you don’t have faith! If you don’t have works, then you don’t have faith!

When James wrote about Abraham, he was very clear that Abraham’s works were part of his faith:

“My brothers and sisters, if people claim they have faith, but do nothing, their faith is worth nothing. Can faith like that save them? Suppose a brother or sister in Christ might need clothes or food. If you say to that person, ‘God be with you! I hope you stay warm and get plenty to eat,’ but you do not give what that person needs, your words are worth nothing. In the same way, faith by itself – that does nothing – is dead. But someone might say, ‘You have faith, but I have works.’ Prove your faith without doing anything, and I will prove my faith by what I do. You believe there is one God. Good! But the demons believe that, too, and they tremble with fear. You foolish person! Do you want evidence that faith without works is worth nothing? Abraham, our father, was made right with God by what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar. So you see that Abraham’s faith and his works worked together. His faith was made complete by his works. This shows the full meaning of the Scripture that says: ‘Abraham believed God and God accepted Abraham’s faith, and that faith made him right with God.’ And Abraham was called God’s friend. So you see that people are made right with God by what they do, not by faith only. Another example is Rahab, the prostitute, who was made right with God by something she did. She welcomed the spies into her home and helped them escape by a different road. Just as a person’s body that does not have a spirit is dead, so faith that does nothing is dead!”<sup>1</sup>

You can’t get any clearer than that.

If you have faith and don’t have works, you don’t have *pístis*. You don’t have that covenant relationship with Jesus where you trust him and he trusts you because of your faithfulness.

Paul quoted the same passage James quoted: “Abraham believed God

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<sup>1</sup> James 2:14-26

and God accepted Abraham's faith, and that faith made him right with God."<sup>1</sup> The Church takes what Paul said, and they turn it into this idea that we're saved by belief – and belief alone! But right there in the New Testament, James clarified that the full meaning of this verse is shown in that Abraham *obeyed* God. His faith was not just belief. His faith was action. That's the full meaning of this verse.

If you think you have faith, but you don't have works, then you don't have the same kind of faith Abraham had.

Our faith should be just like the faith of Abraham. We are not saved merely by believing in Jesus. We are saved by joining ourselves to him in fidelity. We are saved by entering into relationship with him out of love.

When the Church says that we are saved by belief alone, without doing anything, they're essentially just saying that Jesus is our ticket into heaven. They treat the Son of God as a free pass for us to go to heaven without us having to live the way God wants us to live. That's not a covenant relationship.

Jesus is not our ticket into heaven. He is the Bridegroom. He is the Son of God. He is a person. And he wants a relationship with his people. If you don't live in that covenant relationship where you do what he wants you to do, then you don't have saving faith.

Jesus came to establish the New Covenant. That covenant is a covenant of marriage where he is the bridegroom and we are the bride, and he will be faithful to his bride, and his bride needs to be faithful to him. It's no longer law. It's marriage. It's love.

It's not about getting into heaven someday. It's about entering into covenant relationship with him right now. And that will continue for eternity. Our eternal life begins when we join ourselves to Jesus. Paul said we die with him and we rise with him.<sup>2</sup> Our eternal life begins right then. It's not *someday we will be in heaven forever* – yes, that is part of it – but our eternal life starts right now when we join Jesus in covenant relationship and become one with him.

Jesus said that many will call him "Lord," but will fail to enter. He said many will try to enter through the narrow gate, but will fail to enter. He said only those who obey him will be allowed to enter.<sup>3</sup>

Why?

Because many will think they can enter simply because they believe in him. Many will think they can enter without repenting and changing their actions. Many will think they can enter without becoming faithful to him and loyal to him. Many will think they can enter without doing what he instructed.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3, 4:9, 4:22; Galatians 3:6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 6:4-8

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-27; Luke 13:24-28

DEAD CHURCH

We're not saved by faith.  
We're saved by πίστις.

“When we are in Christ Jesus, it is not important if we are circumcised or not. The important thing is faith – *the kind of faith that works through love.*”<sup>1</sup>

“Your faith makes you offer your lives as a sacrifice in serving God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:6, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:17

# Chapter 5

## The Protestant Gospel vs. The New Testament Gospel

What is the Gospel? What is the good news? That's what the word *gospel* means. The word *gospel*, or *good news*, is used many times all throughout the New Testament. It's a word most Christians are familiar with – but, do we know what it is?

If you are a Christian, or if you've grown up in Church, I want you to stop and think for a moment: What is the gospel? What have you been told the gospel is? What is your understanding of the gospel?

I was raised in the Church, went to a private Christian school, and spent twenty-five years of my life regularly attending Church every Sunday. I was taught that the gospel is this:

I am a sinner. I have sinned against an eternal God, and therefore I have an eternal debt. Jesus came as the eternal God in the flesh, and he died to pay that eternal debt. So, now I can receive forgiveness for sinning against an eternal God because the eternal debt has been paid, and now I can go to heaven.

Essentially, the gospel I was taught is that Jesus died in my place, so I don't have to. He took my punishment, so that I don't have to pay that debt. I don't have to die, and I can go to heaven.

This is largely what the Protestant Church teaches: that we're saved by believing that Jesus paid our entire debt – that he did everything.

The problem is that this is not the gospel preached in Scripture.

It's not the gospel Jesus preached. It's not the gospel the apostles preached.

Now, I'm not saying you don't receive forgiveness. I'm not saying you don't go to heaven. I'm not saying Jesus' death wasn't important. But they were not preaching, "Jesus died simply to pay your debt," and they were not teaching that he died so that you don't have to.

So often, we look at what Jesus did, and because of what the Protestant Church teaches, we think that we receive salvation by believing in what Jesus did. We think that we don't have to do anything. This idea comes from passages like the one in Ephesians, where Paul said we're saved by grace,

through faith, without works – it’s a free gift of God so that no man can boast.<sup>1</sup> We look at that verse, and we say, “That means we’re saved without doing anything.”

We’ve been talking about this throughout this book. We’ve seen that Jesus and the apostles also clearly taught that you *do* have to do certain things... so then, how can Paul say we’re saved by faith without works so that no man can boast? If I must do something, doesn’t that mean that I can boast?

In the Church, we’re taught that we are saved by believing Jesus did something. We’re taught that we are saved by trusting that he paid our debt and trusting that now we don’t have to die. We’re taught that we don’t have to die for who we’ve been and everything we’ve done.

But, there’s a problem with this.

This is the exact opposite of what Jesus and the apostles taught.

They did teach that we receive forgiveness. They did teach that we go to heaven. But they also taught that we must die.

In the Church today, we treat it as if it’s simply a legal system: *You owe a debt, it needs to be paid*. But that’s not actually addressing the problem. The problem is not debt. The problem is that you became an evil person. When you participated in eating of that tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you gained the knowledge of good and evil. By *participating*, I simply mean that you, at some point in your past, chose to do something that God says is evil – you participated. And by *knowledge*, I mean the same thing the word *knowledge* means in the Bible – it doesn’t mean you know facts and information; it means you have experiential knowledge – you know evil personally, through experience.

By committing evil, you became an evil person. The penalty is death – not because of a legal system – but because the evil must not continue. It must be stopped. You have become a person who cannot continue to exist.

So, it’s not just about debt payment. It’s not just about forgiveness. That evil person must be put to death. That evil person that now exists because you have evil in your heart must die. You cannot enter the presence of God with evil still inside of you. You must die. The evil must be stopped.

So, Jesus’ death was not only about forgiveness; it wasn’t simply about paying your debt. It wasn’t just a legal system. Jesus and the apostles taught that his death was about setting you free from sin.<sup>2</sup> It was about removing the evil by putting it to death. Jesus died so that you can join yourself to him and die with him. He died so that evil person in you – who you are – can die.

He didn’t die so that you don’t have to. No – he died so you can die

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 8:31-36; Romans 6-8; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:15; Galatians 1:3-4, 5:16; Colossians 2:11; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 8:6-10:23; 9:14-15; 10:20-21; 1 Peter 1:18-23, 2:24-25; 2 Peter 1:4, 2:19; 1 John 3:4-10, 5:18

with him.

This is what Paul said about it:

“I have been crucified with Christ, and I do not live anymore – it is Christ who lives in me. I still live in my flesh, but I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.”<sup>1</sup>

In this verse, Paul described himself as being crucified with Jesus. It wasn't just Jesus who died. For some reason, Paul considered himself to have died with Jesus, and he said that he was no longer the person living – it was Jesus living in him.

I read this verse so many times while growing up in Church, and I always thought Paul was basically just being poetic. What he said is not the gospel I was told. I was not told the gospel is that I die with Christ. I was told the gospel is that Jesus died so I don't have to. I was told the gospel was entirely about debt payment. So, I assumed Paul must have been speaking somewhat poetically about how his life changed after he became a Christian. He must have been describing his experience – not explaining a concept essential to the gospel message.

But, that's not what was happening here.

This concept of *dying with Jesus* is consistently what Paul preached in all his letters. He didn't just say it about himself – he said it about everyone. He repeatedly taught that you die with Christ – not that Christ died in your place. His gospel wasn't about substitution. It was about joining ourselves to Jesus and dying with him. Here are several examples where we can see that this is what Paul preached as part of his gospel message:

“May it never be that I boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through that cross the world has been crucified to me and I have been crucified to the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Again – through the cross, Paul was crucified. He preached that he died with Jesus – not that Jesus died in his place. And he said this is true about everyone, not just himself:

“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature. They have given up their old selfish feelings and the evil things they wanted to do.”<sup>3</sup>

In this verse, Paul went from saying that *he* had been crucified with Christ to saying that *everyone* who belongs to Christ has crucified their sinful nature. In other words, it's not just about him, and he was not just being poetic.

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 2:20

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 6:14

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5:24



He was not just talking about his own journey. He was saying this is true of everyone who belongs to Christ.

He said this again: “In Christ you were also circumcised, but not with a circumcision done by hands. It was a circumcision done by Christ, which cut away the body of flesh. When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised up with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Through Jesus, we are circumcised – our flesh is cut away. More than that, when we are baptized, we are buried with Christ. Just like Jesus was buried in a tomb, we also are buried with him when we are baptized. Why? Because, as Paul said many times elsewhere, we died with Jesus. We died with him and we were buried with him.

He also said, “Since you died with Christ and were made free from the elementary teachings of the world, why do you act as if you are still are living in this world...?”<sup>2</sup>

Notice what Paul said here. He asked the Colossians a question based on something that he presumed they already knew. He said, “since you died with Christ... why do you act as if you are still living in this world?” Paul presumed that they already knew they had died with Christ. Remember – Paul was the one who had preached the gospel to the Colossians in the first place. He presumed they knew they had died with Christ because that was the gospel message he had originally preached to them! So, in his letter, he was saying to them, “you already know that you died with Jesus – so why are you still acting like you live in this world? Why are you acting like you haven’t died?”

A few paragraphs later, he re-iterated: “You died, and your new life is hidden with Christ in God.”<sup>3</sup>

This is clearly the message Paul preached. He never said, “Jesus died in your place.” He never said, “Jesus is your substitute.” And he never said, “Jesus died so you don’t have to die.” He taught that Jesus died so that you die with him.

He wrote to the Corinthians, “The love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, so all have died.”<sup>4</sup>

So, we see that Paul said:

- Through the cross, the world was crucified to him, and he was crucified to the world

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 2:11-12

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:20

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:3

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14

- The flesh is crucified through Jesus – those who belong to him have given up their old selfish nature and its desires
- In Christ, we are circumcised – not with traditional circumcision, but by having our flesh – our sinful nature – cut away
- When we are baptized, we are buried with Jesus and rise from the dead with him
- We died with Jesus and were made free from this world
- We died with Jesus and our new life is with Jesus
- Jesus died for all, therefore all have died

Repeatedly, Paul preached, “You died with Christ. You were crucified with Christ. Everyone who belongs to Christ has been crucified with him. One died and so all have died. I’ve been crucified with Christ.”

The gospel that Paul preached is not that Jesus died so I don’t have to. The gospel Paul preached is that I died with him. Who I was died. The apostles understood that Jesus didn’t come just to pay debt. He didn’t come to take your place as your substitution. They understood that it’s about your sin. Your evil heart must die. Who you are as an evil person must die. That’s what the Law says.<sup>1</sup>

You cannot come into God’s presence as an evil person. You can’t come into God’s presence with evil still in your heart. That person must die. You can’t be someone who continues doing evil, and who continues having evil within you. The evil has to die. You – the evil person – must die. That’s what Jesus’ death was about.

In the Book of Romans, Paul wrote an entire chapter focused on this. Here is a section from that chapter:

“What then shall we say? Do you think we should continue sinning so that grace may abound? Absolutely not! *We died to sin*, so how can we continue living in sin? *Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus participated in his death through that baptism? Therefore, when we were baptized, we were buried with Christ and participated in his death.* So, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we also can live a new life. *Christ died, and we have been joined with him by dying too.* So we will also be joined with him by rising from the dead as he did. *We know that our old life died with Christ on the cross so that our sinful selves would have no power over us and we would not be slaves to sin. Anyone who has died is made free from sin.* Now if we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him. Christ was raised from the dead, and we know that he

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 17:17, 19:19, 22:21, 22:24, 24:7; 1 John 1:5-6

cannot die again. Death has no power over him now. Because, *when Christ died, he died to defeat the power of sin once for all*. But he now has a new life, and his new life is with God. In the same way, *you should consider yourselves as being dead to sin and alive with God in union with Christ Jesus.*<sup>1</sup>

So, in this section, Paul was saying that when Jesus died, you died with him. You die to sin. You participate in the death of Jesus through baptism. When you are baptized, you're buried with Jesus. Your old life, which was controlled by sin because you had a sinful nature, died with Jesus, so sin has no power over you now.

Paul did not say Jesus died so you don't have to. He said Jesus died and you died with him. You join him in death. You follow him in death. That old person you were, born from Adam with the knowledge of good and evil – that person must die. Through Jesus, that life ends. You die with him. Your old self dies. The person you used to be dies.

But more than this, it's clear from the way he addressed the issue that this wasn't something new he was explaining to his audience. Just like his letter to the Colossians, this was a message he expected them to already be familiar with. He asked them how they can continue living in sin if they've already died to sin. He assumed they already knew that they had died. He said, "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ participated in his death through that baptism?" So, he was presuming that they already knew this. He said, "we know that our old life died with Christ..." Again, this wasn't new information.

Based on the way Paul wrote about this, it's clear that he assumed his audience already knew that they had died with Jesus. This means that *dying with Jesus* was an essential part of the gospel message they would have already heard when they became Christians.

The gospel Paul preached was that we die with Jesus – that we're buried with him when we're baptized, and sin loses its power over us. It wasn't debt payment, and it wasn't substitution. We see this message spread throughout all his letters.

Furthermore, he wasn't the only one who preached this. Jesus taught the same thing. This is what Jesus said:

"Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who try to hold on to their lives will give up true life. Those who give up their lives for me will hold on to true life."<sup>2</sup>

So, Jesus said the same thing Paul said.

Paul said, "I've been crucified with Christ." He said everyone who

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 6:1-11, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:38-39

belongs to Christ has been crucified with him. The reason Paul said this was because Jesus had said that unless you take up your cross and follow him, you're not worthy of him. Paul was crucified with Jesus because Paul had taken up his own cross and followed him.

If you try to hold onto your old life, you will not have true life. Why? Because you must die.

If you're trying to hold on to who you used to be, you can't have true life – because in order to have true life, you have to die with Jesus.

This was something Jesus said repeatedly. It's not just that each of the gospel writers recorded him saying it. No – Matthew recorded it twice. Luke recorded it three separate times. Obviously, this was something Jesus said over and over again.

If you want to follow him, you must take up your cross and follow him to death.

Many times, we don't realize what that means because our modern Church culture has lost the significance of what it meant to carry a cross. We think of the cross as a religious symbol. We think of the cross as a good thing. We don't think of the cross the way people did two thousand years ago.

The cross was a form of brutal execution. The Romans regularly crucified people and displayed their execution publicly along the sides of busy roads. Crucifixion was a terrible form of death. It was slow, agonizing, and humiliating. And, the Romans would often make their victims carry their own crosses to the place where they would be put to death.

This is what Jesus' audience would have thought of when he told them to take up their cross and follow him. They would have immediately remembered the crucifixions they had personally witnessed. They would have immediately thought about the people they had seen carrying their crosses just before their deaths.

Furthermore, though they did not understand it at the time, they were about to see Jesus carry his own cross up a hill to his own death. They were about to witness his execution. This statement was about to become very real to them.

The second time Matthew recorded Jesus saying this, he said, "From that time on Jesus began telling his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, where the Jewish elders, the leading priests, and the teachers of the law would make him suffer greatly. He told them he must be killed and then be raised from the dead on the third day... Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to follow me, they must set aside their own interests. They must take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will lose their

life, and those who lose their lives for me will have true life.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was saying, “You are about to see me pick up a wooden, splintery cross, carry it out to my own place of execution, and die. And, unless you do the same thing, you’re not worthy of me.” “Carrying your cross” isn’t about being willing to face persecution, or “dying to self” after you become a Christian, as many Christians think. It isn’t something you learn to do with time. Jesus was saying that in order to become his disciple in the first place, you must grab your own cross and follow him to death. You must die with him. If you try to hold on to your life, you will lose true life.

Mark recorded saying Jesus saying the same thing: “If anyone wants to follow me, they must set aside their own interests. They must take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will give up true life. But those who give up their lives for my sake and for the Good News will have true life.”<sup>2</sup>

Luke recorded Jesus saying this three times:

“Jesus said to all of them, ‘If anyone wants to follow me, they must set aside their own interests. They must take up their cross daily and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will give up true life. But those who give up their lives for me will have true life.’”<sup>3</sup>

“Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my follower.”<sup>4</sup>

“Those who try to keep their lives will lose them. But those who give up their lives will save them.”<sup>5</sup>

And John wrote it down as well:

“I tell you the truth, a grain of wheat must fall to the ground and die to make much fruit. But if it never dies, it remains only a single seed. Those who love their lives will lose them, but those who hate their lives in this world will keep true life forever.”<sup>6</sup>

So, the writers of the gospels recorded Jesus repeatedly saying that if you try to hold onto your old life, you can’t have life. He was saying you must give up your life. You must take up your cross. You must be crucified with him. Not only did he say you have to do this, but he said that if you don’t do this, you can’t be his follower.

Essentially he was saying, “If you don’t die with me, you cannot be my follower.” If you don’t die with Jesus, you cannot be a Christian.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:21-22, 24-25

<sup>2</sup> Mark 8:34-35

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:23-24

<sup>4</sup> Luke 14:27

<sup>5</sup> Luke 17:33

<sup>6</sup> John 12:24-25

Jesus was talking to his disciples. They were about to watch him literally take his cross to his death, and he was telling them, “Unless you do the same, you cannot be my follower.”

This is where Paul got this idea that he was crucified with Christ – that he died with him. It’s what Jesus taught! Jesus and Paul were saying the same thing. They were both saying you must die with him in order to live. In order to be a follower of Jesus, in order to be a disciple of Jesus, you must be crucified with him.

If you want to live, you have to die. That’s the message Jesus and Paul were both preaching.

It’s not *Jesus died so you don’t have to*. It’s not *Jesus took your place so now you don’t have to die*. No, Jesus was saying, “If you want to follow me, you need to follow me into death. You have to die.” When you choose to become a Christian, you’re not choosing to just believe that he did something on your behalf. You’re not choosing to believe that he did something for you so you don’t have to do anything.

No, when you become a Christian and you get baptized into Jesus, you are saying, “I choose to die with him. I choose to die. Everything I am dies. My old life dies.” You’re acknowledging that if you try to hold onto your old life, you can’t have life. And if you try to follow Jesus without dying, you won’t have life. If you try to become a Christian without dying, without ending who you were, you won’t have life.

This is the message they were preaching.

This is the message of salvation that Jesus and the apostles proclaimed. You must die in order to be his disciple.

But, that’s not what the Church teaches. The Church says you become a Christian and then, over the course of your life, you learn how to “die to self.” In other words, they teach that after you become a Christian, over the course of your life, you learn how to stop thinking about yourself, and how to, generally speaking, do good things.

That’s not what Jesus said. That’s not what Paul said. They said if you want to be his disciple in the first place, you have to die. It’s a choice at conversion. The only reason it seems like it’s not a choice at conversion is simply because it’s not the gospel the Church is preaching. The only reason our experience tells us that Christians have to learn to “die to self” throughout the rest of their lives is because Christians aren’t dying with Christ in the first place. They’re still alive! It’s not Jesus living in them! Our experience has become our standard for what is true – not Scripture.

In order to become a Christian, you must die. It’s not the other way

## DEAD CHURCH

around. You “die to self” in order to become a Christian.

Today, the Church preaches that you are saved by believing. They preach that you are saved by trusting that Jesus did something for you so that you don’t have to die. That’s not biblical. You must die to become his disciple.

If you have not died, you do not have life. That’s what Jesus preached. That’s what Paul preached. If you think you can become a Christian and hold onto your old life, you are ignoring the words of Jesus.

The Church is telling you one thing, and Jesus is telling you another. His words are the exact opposite of what the Church is preaching. He said if you try to hold onto your old life, you will not have life. He was saying, “If you try to follow me without taking up your cross and dying, you are not worthy of me and you cannot be my follower.” But the Church tells you that all you have to do is believe in him.

Someone is lying.

Who is the liar? Is it Jesus, or is it the modern Church? Someone must be lying, because they are teaching the exact opposite of one another.

If you want to be a Christian, if you want to be a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Jesus, and you want eternal life, you must die. That is what Jesus and the apostles preached.

However, that’s not the only thing they preached.

We have this problem in the Church today where people are raised to think that the gospel is *the cross*. The Church teaches that the gospel is what Jesus did on the cross – that he died for our sins and paid our debt. I was raised being taught the “five-finger” gospel:

Jesus  
Died  
For  
My  
Sins

I was told that this message is the most important message. I was told we should never move on from this message. I was told that this message is the central point of all Christianity.

But there’s a problem:

That’s not the gospel.

There’s an old Yiddish proverb, “a half-truth is a whole lie.”

In other words, if you’re not telling the full truth, then you’re still not telling the truth. If you’re leaving something out, then it’s still a lie.

The gospel that says, “Jesus died for my sins” is not the truth. It’s a lie. Why?

Because it’s a half-truth. The gospel preached in Scripture is not just the death of Jesus. If Jesus died, and that’s where we’re ending the story, and all we talk about is his death on the cross, then it’s a half-truth. And if it’s a half-truth, then it’s still not the truth. It’s missing what is most important.

The Church tells us that Jesus died entirely to pay our debt. They tell us that his sacrifice is how we gain salvation. But Jesus didn’t just die. He rose from the dead. His resurrection is just as important as his death. If he hadn’t resurrected, then the gospel message is empty and useless.

Those aren’t my words! Paul said it himself: “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless... If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless; you are still in your sins.”<sup>1</sup>

If we are only preaching a gospel that is about the death of Jesus, then we don’t understand the gospel at all. Paul said that if the gospel you’re believing in and trusting in is only that Jesus died, then your faith is useless. If Jesus died on the cross, but didn’t rise from the dead, then you’re still in your sins!

Jesus’ death wasn’t enough! His death doesn’t set us free! Without his resurrection, nothing was accomplished by his death. Without his resurrection, our faith is useless and we’re still in our sins!

If his resurrection is really this important, then clearly his death and resurrection were about more than just paying a debt! If it were really all about debt payment, then the debt would have been paid in full when he died – but Paul said that if Jesus hadn’t risen from the dead, then our faith would be useless, and we would still be in our sins. So, it must be more than just debt payment – right?

If our faith is useless without his resurrection, then why does the Church teach that the gospel is all about him dying in our place? Why does the Church teach that the gospel is “Jesus died for my sins”? Without his resurrection, his death doesn’t take our sins – which would mean that even though he died, the debt still hadn’t been paid.

In the gospel preached in the Church today, the resurrection has no real significance. They talk about it – sure. But no one really knows why Jesus had to rise from the dead. No one really understands why it was so significant. Many pastors explain that his resurrection simply proved that the sacrifice was accepted and paid in full. They say it was just a sign for us to know that there was nothing else owed. They say it wasn’t a necessary part of our salvation, but it was for our benefit so we would know that our debt is cleared. They say that

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14, 17



his resurrection was proof of what had already occurred in his death.

But that's not what Paul said! Paul said that if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, our faith is useless. He said that if Jesus hadn't risen from the dead, then we would still be in our sins. Clearly, our salvation has just as much to do with his resurrection as it does with his death.

The gospel is not "Jesus died on the cross." He rose from the dead, too! And if he hadn't risen from the dead, then there is nothing to the gospel! If he hadn't risen from the dead, then what he did was useless.

Why?

Because his death wasn't about paying debt. His death was about setting us free. He died so that our sinful lives would die with him. And he rose again so that we could live a new life – not just in Heaven someday, but right now – in this life.

Just like you must take up your cross and follow Jesus into death, you also must rise from the dead with him into a new life. Your old life died with him and was buried with him. But, you also rose from the dead with him and can now live a new life.

You die with him. You rise with him.

Earlier we looked at a portion of Romans 6. We focused on the fact that Paul said you must die with Christ. But let's read that same section again, and see what he said about rising with Christ:

"What then shall we say? Do you think we should continue sinning so that grace may abound? Absolutely not! We died to sin, so how can we continue living in sin? Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus participated in his death through that baptism? Therefore when we were baptized, we were buried with Christ and participated in his death. *So, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we also can live a new life.* Christ died, and we have been joined with him by dying too. *So we will also be joined with him by rising from the dead as he did.* We know that our old life died with Christ on the cross so that our sinful selves would have no power over us and we would not be slaves to sin. Anyone who has died is made free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we know *we will also live with him. Christ was raised from the dead, and we know that he cannot die again. Death has no power over him now.* Because, when Christ died, he died to defeat the power of sin once for all. *But he now has a new life, and his new life is with God. In the same way, you should consider yourselves as being dead to sin and alive with God in union with Christ Jesus.*"<sup>1</sup>

Just like Jesus was raised from the dead, we too can live a new life. Just like we were joined with him by dying, we are also joined with him by rising from the dead. He rose from the dead and has a new life, and his new life is

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 6:1-11, emphasis added

with God – so we, too, have new lives, and we are alive with God in union with Jesus.

Paul did not just say that, when you were baptized into Christ, you died with him; he said you rose with him too. That’s what baptism is: you go into the water, then you come out of the water; you die with Jesus and are buried with him, then you rise with him.

Now, baptism is a huge topic for a whole other discussion. But, in the New Testament when the apostles were preaching and people asked, “What must we do to be saved?” their answer was, “Repent and get baptized.”<sup>1</sup>

Baptism is how you join yourself to Jesus. You die with him and rise with him. You join yourself to Jesus through both repentance and baptism – not just one or the other. If you get baptized and your life doesn’t change, then you didn’t die with him and rise into a new life. Through repentance, your old life dies, because you stop being who you used to be – your actions and lifestyle completely change. Through baptism, you are buried with Jesus and rise with him into a new life.

Following Jesus means you can’t just continue living your old life. You can’t just continue doing the things you used to do. You can’t continue living in sin. When someone truly becomes a Christian, they die with Jesus and rise with him into a new life. Their old life is gone, and they begin to live a new life.

Paul was saying that you should consider yourself as dead to sin and alive with God. That old person you used to be is dead. But, it’s not just that that person is dead. It’s not just that you stop being who you used to be, and it’s not just that you stop living in sin. You also rise into a new life. Jesus didn’t just die; he rose from the dead! When you join yourself to him, you rise with him into a new life! You rise with him and are with God, in union with Christ.

Paul wrote about this elsewhere: “You were taught to leave your old self – to stop living the evil way you lived before. That old self is being corrupted, because people are fooled by the evil things they want to do. But you were taught to be made new in your hearts, to become the new person. That new person is created according to God – truly good and holy.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul was describing the gospel message he had originally preached to the Ephesians. He was reminding them of what they had been taught when they first heard about Jesus. He was reminding them that they were taught to leave aside their old lives. They were taught to give their old lives up and stop living how they used to live. But that’s not all they were taught. They were also taught to become the new person – a person who is created according to God

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:37-38

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:22-24

– truly good and holy.

If you're joined to Jesus, your old self – your old sinful self – is dead, and you have risen with Christ into a new life where you are created according to God – truly good and holy. You are made new in your heart. You become a new person. Your old life is dead, and, like Jesus, you are living a new life.

Paul also wrote, “In Christ you were also circumcised, but not with a circumcision done by hands. It was a circumcision done by Christ, which cut away your sinful nature. When you were baptized, you were buried with Christ, and you were raised up with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised Christ from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Again – when you are baptized, you are buried with Christ and you are raised with him. Later in this same letter, Paul said:

“Therefore since you were raised with Christ, focus on the things above, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God. Fix your thoughts on the things above, not the things on earth. For you died, and your new life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, is revealed, you will be revealed with him in glory.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, through Paul's letter, we can read between the lines to see what Paul had preached when he first brought the gospel to the Colossians. In his letter, he kept referring to what the Colossians already knew – things they knew because it was what he had preached to them when they first believed in Jesus. He wrote to them, reminding them that they had died – they died with Christ and rose with him. He was reminding them not only that they had died with Jesus, but that they were raised with him, too. All his instructions are built on this foundation – a foundation of death and resurrection.

Through this, we can see that when Paul first went to the Colossians, he preached a gospel in which people were called to die and rise with Jesus. He preached a gospel that included both the death and resurrection of Jesus. He preached a gospel in which our old lives come to an end, and we begin to live new lives.

Paul also wrote, “You have stripped off your old sinful life and the things you did before. You have put on the new person, in which you are being made new in the true knowledge of God according to the image of the One who created you.”<sup>3</sup>

Again, Paul was talking about this new life. If you're joined to Jesus, you've stripped off your old life and you've put on a new life. You have put on a new person – a new man, created according to the image of God. Your

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 2:11-12

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 3:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:9-10

old life dies, and a new life – a new person, a new creation – rises.

A lot of times in the Church we look at these verses, but we don't fully understand it because we're being taught the wrong gospel. We aren't being told that the gospel message is that we die with Christ. We aren't being taught that we must give up everything. We aren't being taught that we must completely die in order to follow Jesus. No – we're being taught that in order to follow Jesus – in order to be a Christian – we must completely *believe*. We're being taught that we have to believe something is true. We're being taught that it's just about acknowledging the information.

But that's not what Jesus said, and that's not what Paul said. They said you must pick up your own cross, follow him to your own execution, die with him, and rise with him into a new life.

That's the gospel they preached.

That's what sets you free from being the old person and lets you be a new person. You die and you rise with Jesus as a new person, created according to God. Paul called it a "new creation". He said, "If anyone belongs to Christ, there is a new creation. The old things have gone; the new has come!"<sup>1</sup>

The gospel Jesus and the apostles preached was about becoming a new creation. It was about no longer being the old person. It was about becoming a new person. It was not about believing. It was not just about forgiveness of sins. It was not just about going to heaven. It was about being made into the person that God intended you to be. It was about being made holy and righteous – being made like God. It was about stripping yourself of the old sinful nature that you inherited because of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It was about getting that evil out of your life and becoming a new creation. It was about rising with Jesus into a new life, becoming a new person, and becoming a new creation.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot experience God's kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

That's exactly what Jesus and Paul preached everywhere else! Your old self dies. The person who is a slave of sin dies, and you are set free. You rise with Jesus into a new life, as a new creation. You are born again.

Unless that happens, you cannot experience God's kingdom.

So, if Jesus and the apostles all taught that you must die with him and you must rise with him, what does that practically mean?

Over the course of Church history, the Church has adopted a lot of human traditions and Greek traditions. One of those traditions is that we've

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>2</sup> John 3:3

become distracted with Greek philosophy. What I mean is this: Jesus and the apostles were all very practical. If you read through the gospels, paying attention to the action steps that Jesus gave, you'll find that he gave very clear practical action steps. He said, "Do this. Do that. Live this way. Do that." It's very clear – especially in the book of Luke. Repeatedly, Jesus taught what we should be *doing*. Paul gave a lot of practical instructions, too.

My point is this: Jesus and the apostles did not preach philosophical ideas. They didn't get distracted with all the theology that the Church has gotten bogged down with.

For hundreds of years, the Church debated with one another about whether Jesus was fully God or fully man. Then they debated about the Trinity. Then they debated about predestination and God's sovereignty. They fill their minds with theological jargon and argue with one another about their own philosophical terms. Educated scholars have brought their intellectualism and Greek love of philosophy, and have distorted Christianity, completely missing the point of everything Jesus and the apostles taught.

The Church has become distracted, debating all these philosophical concepts, all the while missing or ignoring the fact that, for the most part, Jesus and the apostles preached lifestyle. They didn't preach philosophical ideas – they taught practical action.

Jesus was not a Greek. He was not a Gentile. He didn't come, loving philosophy. He was a Jewish rabbi. He was called a teacher, not because he taught philosophy, but because he taught people how they should live. His teaching was down-to-earth. It was practical. It was actionable.

So, when we look at the gospel Jesus and the apostles preached, we need to look for the practical action steps and not get caught up in philosophical ideas. If we tell people, "you must die with Christ and rise with Christ," but we don't explain what that means on a practical level, then we're not actually helping anyone – because that leaves it as a philosophical concept, and doesn't help anyone understand what they must do to be saved. Philosophical concepts and ideas don't help anyone if they don't know what those ideas mean on a practical level. Furthermore, when we teach from the Bible, if we focus on theological, philosophical ideas (which are often just a lot of meaningless jargon), then we're not doing what Jesus and the apostles did. They taught action. They taught practical things that everyone could understand. They taught lifestyle. They gave people action steps.

If we can't explain to someone what it practically means to die with Christ and rise with him, then we can't help anyone come to him. It's not enough to just know the theological terms. It's not enough to just know and believe the information. It's not enough to know you must die with Jesus and rise with him. If you don't do it, then you can't have life. So, we must be able

to explain to people what it means – practically – to die with Jesus and rise with him. We must be able to explain it in a way that they can then go do it.

I've encountered some people who believe that we must die with Jesus and rise with him. But they often still treat it as a philosophical concept. They treat it as a spiritual thing that happens in baptism. They don't teach people how to die, and they don't teach people how to live a new life. They just baptize people and tell them to believe that they're dying and rising with Jesus.

But that is not what it means to die with Jesus or rise with him. Jesus and the apostles taught lifestyle. They taught that you must change the way you live your life. They taught that you must become faithful to Jesus, you must love him, you must stop being who you used to be, and you must choose to become a new person. They taught action. They told people what those people should start doing with their lives.

If you get baptized, believing that you are dying with Jesus and rising with him, but you continue living your life the same way you did before you were baptized, then you didn't die with him, and you didn't rise with him. If your lifestyle isn't radically redefined and completely changed in every way, then your old life didn't die!

Dying with Jesus and rising with him isn't just about going under water and coming back up. Jesus taught that dying with him and rising with him is a practical thing.

### **Dying with Jesus**

Jesus said, "You are not thinking about the things of God, but only about the things people think are important.' Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone wants to follow me, they must set aside their own interests. They must take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will lose their life, and those who lose their lives for my sake will find life.'"<sup>1</sup>

When Jesus said that we must lose our lives in order to have life, he said that we must set aside our own interests. So, what does that mean?

Setting aside our own interests means that everything changes. It means everything that is important to us changes. Everything we care about changes. Our priorities change, our decisions change, our values change. It means we give up everything that's important to us. And, it means we stop looking out for our own needs (our own interests). We stop pursuing what is best for ourselves.

Jesus also said, "All those who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or farms for my name's sake will receive a hundred

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 16:23-25

times as much and they will inherit eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

“I tell you the truth, all those who have left houses, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, or farms for me and for the Good News will get more than they left. Here in the present age they will have a hundred times more homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and farms. And with those things, persecutions. But in the age that is coming they will have eternal life.”<sup>2</sup>

“If anyone comes to me but does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters – or even his own life – he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.”<sup>3</sup>

“...you must give up everything you have to be my disciple.”<sup>4</sup>

“I tell you the truth, all those who have left houses, wives, brothers, parents, or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will get much more in this age. And in the age that is coming, they will have eternal life.”<sup>5</sup>

Jesus repeatedly said that we must give up everything. We must give up everything that’s important to us. We must give up everything that is important in this life – family, homes, fields (or in other words, businesses, careers, livelihood). Whatever it is, we must give it up. We must leave those things behind. Those things can no longer be our priority. Following Jesus costs everything.

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he must do to have life, Jesus said, “One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me.”<sup>6</sup>

Taking up the cross means giving up this life. It means you stop holding onto possessions, you stop caring about the things of this life, you stop being preoccupied with the cares and concerns of this world. It means you stop living like everyone else, and you live only for Jesus. When we die with Jesus, all the things we used to care about die too. When we die with Jesus, we completely stop focusing on all the things of this world and this life.

Jesus also said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so excited that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field. Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:29

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 10:29-30

<sup>3</sup> Luke 14:26-27

<sup>4</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>5</sup> Luke 18:29-30

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:21 (NKJV)

it.”<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, the kingdom of God is something so valuable that, when you find it, you happily give up everything to get it. Why? Because that’s the cost. In order to gain the kingdom of God, you must give up everything. You cannot continue living for this world, this life, and all the things of this life. You must give them all up to have God and enter his kingdom.

So, taking up your cross and following Jesus to death means you give up everything that is important to you. It means you stop living for this world. It means you stop living for family, friends, homes, fields, possessions, and wealth. It means you stop pursuing comfort, luxury, a higher standard of living, your dream job, or your life goals. It means you stop building your life around the things everyone else is building their lives around. Paul said it means you stop living for yourself:

“The love of Christ compels us, because we are convinced that One died for all, so all have died. Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Dying with Jesus and rising with him means you no longer live for yourself, doing what you want, and enjoying all the things of this life. It means you begin to live for Jesus, and Jesus alone.

It’s not just about believing. It’s not just about going to Church. It’s about what you’re living for, what you’re pursuing, what you’re doing with your time, what you’re doing with your money, what you’re doing with your possessions, and how you make your decisions.

Here’s an example:

When I was young, I lived for marriage. I desperately wanted to get married. Every decision I made was based around the fact that I wanted to get married. A relationship was what was most important to me. There was one particular girl I was really interested in, and I would spend my time talking to her, getting to know her, and hanging out in the same circles as her. Having a relationship was my priority. All my decisions became about, “How can I get married?” It was what was most important to me at that point in my life.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God needs to take that priority. God’s Kingdom must be what is most important to you. It should be what you make all your decisions around.

When I was living for marriage, I was still living for myself. I thought I was a Christian. I thought I was born again. I thought I was saved. But I proved through my actions that I was still living for this life. I was still living

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:14-15



for the things I wanted. I was still looking out for my own best interests. I hadn't set aside my own interests. I hadn't given up everything to follow Jesus.

Marriage is not the exception to the rule. You cannot live for God and for marriage at the same time. You cannot be divided.<sup>1</sup> You either live entirely for God and God alone, or you live for something or someone else.

Jesus was saying, "If you want to follow me, you must stop caring about everything else. If you want to follow me, you must leave everything behind. You leave everything at the door, or you don't get in."

Following Jesus is all or nothing. If you think you've died with him, but you still live for other things, then you haven't died with him. As Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>2</sup>

If your decisions, your lifestyle, the places you go, the job you work, the school you choose, your career, your family, your finances, your home, or anything else are not about living for Jesus and doing what he wants, then you haven't died, and you haven't risen with him. And if you're not doing what he *said to do* with those things, then you haven't died with him, and you haven't risen with him – even if you've convinced yourself that you're living for him in those areas.

That's what it means to die with Christ. Everything that's important to you changes. You leave it all at the door. If you're trying to bring something with you, then you haven't died.

### **Rising with Jesus**

As we saw in 2 Corinthians 5, Jesus died so we would no longer live for ourselves, but live for him. We also saw in Romans 6 that we are set free from sin – we're no longer slaves of sin, and we can live for God.

But, it's not just that we don't sin anymore. It's not just that we don't do bad things anymore.

Remember – *repentance* doesn't just mean you stop sinning. *Repentance* means you stop doing one thing, and you start to do something different. It means you stop living a certain way, and you begin to live a different way. Action is required for true repentance.

The resurrection is where we gain a new lifestyle. The resurrection is the new life that we begin to live. So much of the Church focuses on "not sinning," but they neglect the other half of the gospel – the resurrection.

Peter said, "Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree so we would

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 7:29-35

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

die to sin and start living for what is right.”<sup>1</sup>

Peter didn’t just say that we die to sin. He didn’t just say that we should stop sinning. Yes, we should – but that’s not all he said. He said that Jesus bore our sins so that we would die to sin (stop sinning) and *start living for what is right*.

This is the second half of repentance. This is the resurrection life. You stop doing bad things, and you start doing good things.

Through the death of Jesus, we can stop living for sin. Through the resurrection of Jesus, we can start living for what is right – doing what God wants.

Paul also wrote, “[Jesus] gave himself for us so he might ransom us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus paid our ransom so that we would no longer live in sin and wickedness, but also so we would become people who are always wanting to do good deeds. Again – it’s both the death and resurrection. Our old life dies with Christ, and we begin to live a new life – a life where we are always wanting to do good deeds.

In Jesus, our old life is gone, our old desires are gone and our old priorities are gone. And in their place, we live a new life, always wanting to do good deeds.

So, in Romans 6, Paul said that we die to sin and rise into a new life. In 1 Peter, Peter said that we die to sin and start living for righteousness. In 2 Corinthians, Paul said that we stop living for ourselves and we start living for Jesus. And in Titus, Paul said that we are ransomed from wickedness and become people who are always wanting to do good deeds.

The resurrection is that new person we become – always wanting to do good deeds.

Paul also wrote about becoming a new creation, saying, “You have stripped off your old sinful life and the things you did before. You have put on the new person, in which you are being made new in the true knowledge of God according to the image of the One who created you.”<sup>3</sup>

In Jesus, our old sinful lives are removed, and we each receive a new life as a new person. We become a new creation – created according to the image of God.

That phrase, “created according to the image of God,” is a phrase borrowed from the Old Testament: “So God created man in his image. In the image of God he created them. He created them male and female.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 3:9-10

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 1:27

Over the years, I've heard a lot of people discuss how we're created in the image of God. A lot of people guess at what that means: *Does it mean we physically look like him? Does it mean we think like him? Does it mean we're creative like him?* The list of speculative ideas goes on and on...

But what I never heard anyone mention is the fact that Paul said the new creation is created in the image of God. Specifically, Paul said that we strip off the old creation, and we become the new creation, which is created in the image of God. In other words, our old creation was not in the image of God anymore.

The implication of what Paul said is that when Moses wrote Genesis, he wasn't saying that man is *still* in the image of God. He was saying that when God originally created man, he created him in his image. We read it and assume that man is still in God's image. But Paul said that the new creation is in the image of God, as opposed to the old creation, which was not.

Furthermore, Paul directly told us what it means to be made in God's image. He said, "You were taught to leave your old self – to stop living the evil way you lived before. That old self is being corrupted, because people are fooled by the evil things they want to do. But you were taught to be made new in your hearts, to become the new person. That new person is created according to God – truly good and holy."<sup>1</sup>

The new person is created according to God – truly good and holy.

Being made in the image of God means being truly good and holy.

When God created Adam, he created him truly good and holy. But when Adam sinned, he stopped being good and holy. Now, through Jesus, we can become a new creation – we can become truly good and holy again. Now, through Jesus, we become people who are always wanting to do good deeds.

When we are created in the image of God, we are called God's children – sons of God. When Adam was created, he was called a son of God.<sup>2</sup> Now, as the new creation, we are called sons of God again. We are his children, inheriting his nature.

John said, "He was in the world, and the world was created through him, but the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him and believe in his name he gave the right to become children of God. They did not become his children by blood – by desire of the flesh or desire of a man. They were born of God."<sup>3</sup>

So, when we rise with Christ and become a new creation, we are born

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:22-24

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Luke 3:38

<sup>3</sup> John 1:10-13

of God. We are children of God. And, being his children, we are like him.

Think of it this way: We inherit a lot of our traits from our parents. For example, I look a lot like my dad. I think a lot like my dad. In a lot of ways, I act a lot like my dad. I've inherited certain traits from him.

Scripture says that when we are raised with Christ, when we are born as children of God, we become like him. We inherit his traits. We are made in his image in the same way that I am, in a sense, made in the image of my dad: I look like him, I act like him, I think like him. When we're born again, we're made in the image of God: We look like him, we act like him, we think like him.

John also said, "All who are born of God do not continue sinning, because God's seed remains in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God. In this way it is apparent who God's children are and who the devil's children are: Those who do not practice righteousness are not God's children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God's children."<sup>1</sup>

If you are God's child, you will not go on sinning. Only the devil's children continue sinning. The children of the devil inherited his nature. They do what their father does: They look like him, they act like him, and they think like him. They are made in his image.

Much like Christians today, the Pharisees kept reassuring themselves that they were children of Abraham and children of God. But they didn't act like God. Jesus said to them, "I know you are Abraham's descendants, but you want to kill me because you don't accept my teaching. I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, but you do what your father has told you." They answered, "Our father is Abraham." Jesus said to them, "If you were really Abraham's children, you would do the things Abraham did. I am a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God, but you are trying to kill me. Abraham did nothing like that. So you are doing the things your own father did." But they said to him, "We are not illegitimate children. God is our Father; he is the only Father we have." Jesus said to them, "If God were really your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own; God sent me. You don't understand what I say, because you cannot accept my teaching. You are from your father the devil, and you want to do what he wants. He was a murderer from the beginning and was against the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he tells a lie, he reveals his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you don't believe me. Can any of you prove that I am guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? The person who

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:9-10

belongs to God hears and obeys the words of God. But you don't hear and obey, because you don't belong to God."<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees claimed to be children of God. They claimed to be God's chosen people. They made all the same claims Christians make today. But they proved whose children they really were by their actions. They acted like the devil. They responded like the devil. They thought like the devil. They inherited his nature, because they were his children.

God's children aren't like them. They don't continue sinning, because they inherit God's nature – they become like God – they look like him, act like him, and think like him.

John also said, "We know that those who are God's children do not continue to sin. The one born of God protects them, and the Evil One cannot touch them."<sup>2</sup>

John clearly taught that those who are born of God, those who are children of God, don't continue sinning. First, because they died to sin. But second, because they rose with Christ into a new life as a new creation, born of God – born again – made in God's image. God's children inherit his nature. They do what their Father does.

Scripture teaches that when we are born again and we become God's children, we become brothers and sisters with Christ himself – co-heirs with Christ.<sup>3</sup> So, everyone who is born again is a brother or sister of Jesus himself. We become part of his family.

But, Jesus didn't say, "Everyone who believes in me is my brother and sister." He didn't say, "Everyone who believes in my message is my family." No, Jesus said, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. My true brother and sister and mother are those who do what my Father in heaven wants."<sup>4</sup>

Those who are truly in his family and truly born of God are those who do what God wants. They do what God wants because they inherit his nature. True children of God will do the things that God does. They're made in his image – they do what he does!

Jesus also said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you *so that you will be children of your Father in heaven*. He causes the sun to rise on evil people and on good people, and he sends rain to those who do right and to those who do wrong. If you love only the people who love you,

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<sup>1</sup> John 8:37-47

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 5:18

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 12:48-49; Mark 3:33-34; Luke 8:21; Hebrews 2:11-12

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 12:48-50

what rewards is there for that? Even the tax collectors do that. And if you are nice only to your friends, you are no better than other people. Even the Gentiles are nice to their friends. Therefore you must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”<sup>1</sup>

God does what is good – even to evil people. He sends them rain, and he provides them with the sun. He doesn’t respond to their evil with evil. He responds to their evil with good. So, if we want to be his children, we also must love our enemies and do good to them. That is what God does, and if we are his children, we will do the same things he does. We must be perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect. His children will be like him.

This is what Jesus, Paul, and John taught. When you become a new person and are created in the image of God again, you become like God. You start thinking like God. For example, God loves his enemies. He does good to his enemies. So, if you say you’re a child of God, but you are not living the way he would live, then you’re not a child of God. God’s children will act like him. God’s children will think like him. God’s children will be like him. They inherit his nature. When you are born again, and you are born of God, you begin to look like him.

Paul said the new creation is created in God’s image – truly good and holy. When your old life dies, the life of sin and evil dies. And when you rise with Christ into a new life, you are born again. You become God’s child. You inherit his nature. Again, as Paul put it: “Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Rising with Jesus into a new life means living the way Jesus lived. It means living a truly good and holy life. It means becoming like God and prioritizing what God prioritizes. As John said, “Whoever says that he abides in God must live as Jesus lived.”<sup>3</sup>

The gospel preached in Scripture is not about believing, and it’s not about just getting into heaven. It’s about becoming a new creation. It’s about your old life dying. Everything about who you used to be dies. That means all the things you used to care about stop being important to you. All the things you used to focus on are no longer significant to you. The way you used to make your decisions changes. You stop thinking the way you used to think. You stop living the way you used to live.

You become like God. You make decisions based on what he cares about. You focus on what he says is important. You care about what God

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:43-48, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:6

loves, and you hate what God hates.

Like the Pharisees, many Christians go through life thinking they are children of God, thinking they are saved, thinking they're the new creation, but they still live for themselves. Their decisions are still about what's best for them – they're still based on the things of this life that they care about. They think they care about what God cares about, but they don't even know what God cares about.

They're deceived – exactly like we were warned many people would be. So, we need to understand what it looks like to live as the new creation, and we need to know how to get to the point where we know what God wants. How do we figure out what God wants us to be doing? What are those “good deeds” Paul said we should always want to do?<sup>1</sup> What does it mean to be a child of God?

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Titus 2:14

# Chapter 6

## Lies Christians Believe About Legalism

As we've already seen, we can't just go through life saying, "I believe in Jesus; therefore, I'm a Christian and I'm saved." Because that's not really what the Bible teaches. However, most Christians today don't realize that this isn't what the Bible teaches. Most Christians follow the teaching of men without even realizing it. They think they're following Scripture, but they're only following what men have told them Scripture teaches.

So, in the next two chapters, I want to address two common responses that a lot of Christians will bring up when talking about faith, obedience, repentance and how all this works together.

The first response that most Christians bring up is: "How do you avoid legalism?" or "How do you avoid being legalistic about it?"

First of all, what do people mean when they say *legalism*?

The definition of *legalism* is:

### ***1. Strict, literal, or excessive conformity to the law or to a religious or moral code***<sup>1</sup>

Basically, when people ask "how do you avoid legalism?" what they mean is, "how do you avoid feeling like you have to do certain things in order to have a right relationship with God?"

This is something that the Church teaches a lot. They say, "We have to avoid being legalistic, because we have to remember that we're saved by faith and not by works. We have to remember that we're saved by believing in Jesus and not by earning our way to God by doing things." This is a common topic in the Church, so it's one of the first things that Christians will bring up when we talk about how obedience is required according to what Scripture teaches.

Typically, when Christians talk about legalism, they talk about two separate things. The first one is the Pharisees.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/legalism>



## **The Pharisees**

The Church tells us the Pharisees were legalistic – that they were strictly following a huge list of rules, trying to earn their way to God. They tell us that we don’t want to be like that. They warn us that we don’t want to be legalistic like the Pharisees.

So, the question is – were the Pharisees legalistic? And, if so, is it something we should avoid?

It’s true that we don’t want to be like the Pharisees – Jesus very clearly condemned the Pharisees for the way they were behaving, acting, and teaching. But what was it that Jesus was condemning them for? The Church tells us it was legalism. The Church tells us it was their strict adherence to the rules and laws that they felt like they absolutely had to follow. The Church tells us that the problem of the Pharisees was that they were too strict in trying to follow every single written law in the Law of Moses.

But that’s not true.

Jesus didn’t speak against the Pharisees because of their legalism. In fact, he said the exact opposite of what the Church tells us. This is what Jesus said:

“Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”<sup>1</sup>

This is something Jesus warned about numerous times – the leaven of the Pharisees. What does that mean?

First, we need to understand what leaven is.

Leaven is essentially yeast. When you’re baking bread, you put just a tiny little amount of yeast into the dough, and that makes the entire batch of dough rise.

*Leaven* was a concept used all throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament. For example, the Jews were told in the Old Testament to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread.<sup>2</sup> The Feast of Unleavened Bread was a reminder to them of when they first left Egypt. When they left Egypt, they didn’t have time to put the leaven into the bread and wait for it to rise. They had to cook the bread and eat it without leaven, because they were in a hurry. The Feast of Unleavened Bread reminded them of this. After the feast, they would continue eating unleavened bread for a week – celebrating Passover. Passover, which also reminded the people of their exodus from Egypt, was eaten with unleavened bread.

In the New Testament, Paul referenced the bread eaten at Passover. He said, “Your boasting is not good. You know the saying, ‘Just a little leaven

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Exodus 12:15-20; Leviticus 23:6; Numbers 28:17; Deuteronomy 16:1-4

makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ Take out all the old leaven so that you will be a new batch of dough without leaven, which you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. So let us celebrate this feast, but not with the bread that has the old leaven – the leaven of sin and wickedness. Let us celebrate this feast with the bread that has no leaven – the bread of sincerity and truth.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul was comparing the bread in the Passover feast to our lives, saying that our lives should be like bread with no leaven in it – the leaven being sin and wickedness. We should be unleavened bread that has no sin and wickedness in us. If we let sin and wickedness in, it will spread – just like a little bit of leaven makes an entire batch of dough rise.

So, Paul compared leaven to sin. Paul also compared leaven to false teaching. He used that exact same quote (“just a little leaven makes the same batch of dough rise”) to explain that leaven is like false teaching in the Church. If you put just a little bit of false teaching into the Church, it will spread throughout the entire Church.

He said, “You were running a good race. Who stopped you from following the truth? This change did not come from the One who called you. Be careful! ‘Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ But I have confidence in the Lord that you will not believe those different ideas. Whoever is confusing you with such ideas will pay the penalty, no matter who he is.”<sup>2</sup>

So, in Scripture we see this idea of leaven as sin and false teaching.

And Jesus warned his disciples, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Jesus was saying that we should beware of the hypocrisy of the Pharisees because it’s wicked, it’s false teaching, and it’s going to spread if you let it in.

If you let hypocrisy in, it will spread.

Here’s the point: Jesus didn’t say, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is legalism.” In fact, legalism is never even mentioned in the Bible. It’s never brought up. It’s never talked about. The words *legalism*, *legalistic*, and *legalist* don’t ever once appear in Scripture. Nowhere in the Bible does it warn about legalism. But it does warn about hypocrisy.

So, what is hypocrisy?

We typically read the word *hypocrite* in English and think it refers to *someone who says one thing but does something else*. While that’s close, it’s not the full meaning of the word.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6-8

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 5:7-10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Luke 12:1

## DEAD CHURCH

The word *hypocrite*, in ancient Greek, was used to refer to an actor on a stage. So, *hypocrite* meant *actor*.

So, when Jesus said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy,” he was saying, “they’re a bunch of actors.” And, what is an actor? An actor is someone who is pretending to be something they’re not. It’s someone who is pretending they’re a different person, but in reality, that’s not who they are at all. He was not saying to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is legalism – a strict adherence to rules and law. He was warning that the Pharisees were a bunch of actors pretending to be something that they’re not.

Furthermore, Jesus explained specifically how the Pharisees were actors, and what he had to say about them demonstrated that he didn’t think they were being too strict, or that they were too concerned about conforming to the rules and laws. No – he was actually warning that the Pharisees were not obeying God in the first place. They were not obeying God at all – the opposite of legalism.

Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Why do you refuse to obey God’s command for the sake of your traditions?”<sup>1</sup> He also said, “You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The things they teach are nothing but human rules.’”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said to the Pharisees, “‘You abandoned the commands of God, and you hold only to human traditions.’ Then Jesus said to them, ‘You are very good at ignoring the commands of God so you can follow your own tradition.’”<sup>3</sup>

He said again, “By your own tradition, which you have handed down, you are rejecting what God said. And you do many things like that.”<sup>4</sup>

So, what do we see from this?

Jesus was not telling the Pharisees, “You guys are strictly adhering to the Law, and you’re being too knit-picky about it.” No, he was saying the exact opposite. He was saying, “You are not obeying the Law. You are not obeying what God said to do. You’ve replaced what God said to do with your own traditions.”

He was not rebuking them for legalism. He was rebuking them because they were not obeying – they were not conforming to what God wanted. That’s

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:3

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15:6-9

<sup>3</sup> Mark 7:8-9

<sup>4</sup> Mark 7:13

the exact opposite of legalism.

He was saying, “You guys are pretending to be people that follow God, but you’re not actually obeying him.” That’s the opposite of legalism. That’s hypocrisy. That’s acting. He was saying, “You guys are a bunch of actors. You are acting like godly, righteous men but you’re not actually doing what God said to do.”

Jesus continued warning about the Pharisees, saying, “They do good things so that other people will see them. They enlarge their phylacteries, and they lengthen their tassels.”<sup>1</sup>

Phylacteries were boxes with Scripture in them that they would wear on their head because they were trying to follow a law that said they should bind the Law to their foreheads.<sup>2</sup> Their tassels served a similar purpose. They took a law which was intended to be metaphorical, and they literally did what the law said to do – they actually tied Scripture to their foreheads. But Jesus wasn’t saying that their problem was that they wore phylacteries and tassels. He was saying that their problem was that they did it for show – they did it to impress people around them, not because they feared and loved God.

He wasn’t rebuking them for their strict adherence and literal conformity to a law that was intended to be metaphorical. He wasn’t really bothered by that at all. What bothered him was the fact that they were only doing it for human respect. What bothered him was that they really only cared about gaining the respect and admiration of others.

He then continued, “Those Pharisees and teachers of the law love to have the most important seats at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues. They love people to greet them with respect in the marketplaces, and they love to have people call them, ‘Rabbi.’”<sup>3</sup>

Again – Jesus was saying that the Pharisees did things for show – not for obedience. They were doing things because they wanted to be seen by others – not because they loved God and were trying to obey his commands. His problem with them was not some kind of strict adherence to the Law. He wasn’t warning about them being legalistic. He was warning about their showmanship – that they were only doing things because they wanted other people to see them and respect them.

They were only doing things because they were a bunch of actors. They were hypocrites. They didn’t actually care about following God and doing what God said; they just wanted people to recognize them and greet them and give them the best seats and the highest honor.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 6:6-8, 11:18

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 23:6-7

## DEAD CHURCH

So, Jesus didn't rebuke them because they were trying hard to obey the Law. No – Jesus rebuked them because they weren't concerned about obeying the Law. He rebuked them because they didn't care about obeying God – they only cared about gaining the respect of other people.

Again – that's not legalism. Legalism is when someone cares too much about obeying the rules and laws. But Jesus rebuked the Pharisees because they didn't care at all.

He also said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You pay tithes on everything you have – even your mint, dill, and cumin. But you ignore the really important teachings of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.<sup>1</sup> These are the things you should do, without neglecting those other things. Blind guides! You are like a person who picks a fly out of a drink and then swallows a camel!”<sup>2</sup>

So again, Jesus was saying that the Pharisees paid tithes on everything. Tithes were in the Law of Moses. It was something God had commanded his people to do. Jesus didn't say, “You guys are being too strict! You're paying tithes on your mint, your dill, and your cumin – you're going overboard with it!” No – that's not what he said! He said, “You're tithing, but you're neglecting what God actually cares about – the weightier matters, the more important teachings. Justice. Mercy. Faithfulness. You're ignoring what's actually important to God!”

Elsewhere, he said that all of the Law and the prophets are summed up in “love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>3</sup> That's what's most important – love – loving God and loving others. That's what all of the Law is really about. Similarly, Jesus often quoted a verse that says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus kept telling the Pharisees that they were missing the point – they didn't understand what God really cares about.

Jesus was saying that what's really most important to God is mercy, justice, and faithfulness. What's most important is that you're loving your neighbor as you love yourself. That's what the Law is truly teaching.

But the Pharisees weren't doing that. They weren't obeying the Law. They were tithing – they were doing their religious duties – but they were neglecting the things that were most important.

Notice how strict the Pharisees were about their tithes – they tithed even on the herbs they grew in their gardens. But Jesus didn't say, “You guys are being too strict about your tithes.” No – in fact, he said, “You should continue doing those things, but you need to stop neglecting the important

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<sup>1</sup> “faithfulness” is *pístis*

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:23-24

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 9:13; 12:7 where Jesus was quoting Hosea 6:6

things. Stop neglecting mercy, justice, and faithfulness. Stop neglecting the things God really cares about. Don't neglect your tithe – but also don't neglect the important matters.”

Jesus wasn't bothered by their apparent legalism. He wasn't bothered with how strictly they were tithing. He was bothered by the fact that they were not obeying the Law in the matters that were most important. The Law is summed up in love – and they weren't doing it.

He didn't rebuke them for legalistically adhering to the Law.

He rebuked them for being lawbreakers.

The Church often mentions the Pharisees as examples of legalism – they tell us we shouldn't be legalistic like the Pharisees. But the Pharisees weren't legalistic. Jesus never once corrected them for being too strict about obeying the Law. He never corrected them for trying to obey God too hard.

Jesus rebuked them for doing the exact opposite. He rebuked them because they refused to obey God. He rebuked them because they didn't take the Law serious enough.

If we try to be different than the Pharisees by trying to not be legalistic, we could very well end up inadvertently becoming exactly like the Pharisees. Because the Pharisees weren't legalistic either. They didn't care about obeying God. They didn't think it was important.

The Pharisees weren't legalistic, they were lawless. They were actors. They acted like they cared about God, but they didn't obey the Law.

As I mentioned earlier, there are two things people tend to bring up when talking about legalism. The first was the Pharisees. The second is Paul.

## **Paul**

Paul said, “For you have been saved by grace through faith [*pístis*]. You did not save yourselves; it was a gift from God. It was not the result of works, so that no one can boast.”<sup>1</sup>

Christians say, “You don't want to be legalistic; you can't earn your way to God. It's not a result of works so that no one can boast. If you're trying to obey God in order to earn your way to him, you'd be able to boast about it, but Paul said no one can boast.”

Right. But here's the thing: There's another verse that sounds like the exact opposite of what Paul said. We've talked about it earlier in this book:

“So you see that people are justified by their works, not by faith only.”<sup>2</sup>

So, we have two seemingly contradictory ideas. Paul said we're saved

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>2</sup> James 2:24

by grace, through faith, and that it's not a result of works so that no man can boast. But James said we're saved by works, and not by faith alone.

Both ideas are found in the Bible. We can't just focus on one and dismiss the other. These two verses are completely compatible – otherwise the Bible isn't true.

As we've already mentioned, *faith* is the word *pístis*. In Greek, it didn't just mean *faith* – it meant *faith* and *faithfulness*, *belief* and *obedience*, *trust* and *loyalty*. It meant fidelity. It meant reliability. When Paul said we're not saved by works, we're saved by faith, he was referring to this reliability, fidelity, and loyalty. He was referring to faithfulness – not just belief. And when James said we are justified by works, not by faith alone, he was clarifying that it is more than just belief – it's fidelity, faithfulness, and reliability.

The only difference between what Paul said and what James said is that they're referring to two different kinds of works.

When Paul said that we're saved by faith, and not works, he was referring to works of the Law of Moses. He was referring to the people who try to get to God by obeying rules. The only way to be saved through this kind of “works” is if you never once break the Law. The Law said that if you disobey one law, you're guilty of breaking all of the Law, and the punishment is death.<sup>1</sup> Paul was saying that you can't enter God's presence this way because no one has done that – everyone has already broken the Law at some point in their life. Everyone has broken the Law of Moses, so you can't be saved by adhering to the Law – you've already broken it! It's over! If you're trying to be saved by adhering to the Law, you're already condemned, because you have already broken the Law at some point.

James, on the other hand, is referring to works of fidelity, loyalty, and faithfulness. He was referring to the kinds of works that come as part of our faith. If we're truly loyal to God, we will want to do what God wants. If we're truly faithful to God, we will obey him out of love – not out of an obligation to obey rules. If we have fidelity to him, then our actions will flow out of that fidelity. James said that we are justified by our works because he was referring to works of loyalty – works of love. He was saying that we are justified by being the kind of people who obey God and do what God wants because we love God and we're loyal to him. We're justified when our actions of obedience naturally flow out of a heart of love. If we truly love God, we will obey him.

James was not saying that we're saved by obeying rules.

Paul was not saying that we're saved without having any good works.

They were both saying the same thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. James 2:10-11; Galatians 5:3; Deuteronomy 27:26

In fact, Paul very strongly preached that people need to obey Jesus in order to be saved.<sup>1</sup> When Paul wrote to Titus, he gave a list of different ways that different people in different situations in life should be living. He talked about older men; he talked about older women; he talked about young women; he talked about husband and wives; he talked about slaves, or servants. And then after he told people, “This is how you should generally be living in these different situations in life,” he said:

“That is the way we should live, because God’s grace that can save everyone has been revealed. It trains us to reject ungodly living and the evil things the world wants to do. Instead, that grace teaches us to live in the present age in a self-controlled and right way and in a way that shows we serve God. We should live like that while we wait for our great hope and the coming of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. He gave himself for us so he might pay the price to free us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>2</sup>

Earlier, we saw that Paul said we’re saved “by grace, through faith...” Here, Paul expounded on that grace. Grace is not just forgiveness. Grace is not just mercy. According to Paul, God’s grace trains us. It teaches us to reject ungodly living. It teaches us to reject the evil things the world wants to do. God’s grace trains us to live the right way. It teaches us self-control. It teaches us to serve God.

God’s grace is more than just forgiveness, mercy, and kindness. His grace changes who we are. It changes our nature. It makes us into people who always want to do good deeds.

God’s grace produces works.

Therefore, if you don’t have works – the “good deeds” kind of works – then you’re not saved. If you don’t have works, then you haven’t been transformed by God’s grace.

Paul also said, “Our people must learn to use their lives for doing good deeds to meet urgent needs so that their lives will not be unfruitful.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Paul, if you don’t use your life for doing good deeds to meet urgent needs, then your life is unfruitful. Good fruit is about doing good deeds. It’s about meeting urgent needs. If you don’t have good fruit, then you’re not saved. John the Baptist and Jesus both said that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 26:20; Romans 3:31, 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:13-17, 6:7-10; Ephesians 2:10, 5:15-17; Philippians 4:9; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Titus 1:16, 2:11-14, 3:8

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:11-14

<sup>3</sup> Titus 3:14

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:9-10, 7:16-19; Luke 3:9



someone is not using their life for the purpose of doing good deeds in order to meet urgent needs, then they will be cut down and thrown into the fire!

Paul knew what it meant to be unfruitful. He knew what Jesus said, and he knew what John the Baptist had said. He knew that if someone is unfruitful, then they're not saved. And he said that a person is only fruitful if they're doing good deeds.

In other words, Paul said that people are saved by works – just like James.

As we mentioned in an earlier chapter, Paul summarized his entire life's message by saying, "I began telling people that they should repent and do works..."<sup>1</sup>

Paul did not preach that we're saved without works. He was only preaching that we can't be saved merely by trying to follow all the rules. However, if we don't have works, then we don't have salvation. Paul never taught anything else.

These are just a few examples. Paul repeatedly taught that works are essential for salvation. In fact, the vast majority of his letters are teaching people that they must have good works! He was instructing people what their lives should look like. He summed up his instructions by saying, "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions."<sup>2</sup>

Paul was saying that all his instructions are really trying to teach people what it means to live in love. He was teaching a love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and a genuine faith – or, fidelity. In other words, he was teaching the same thing James taught.

James taught people that they needed to have good works – works of love. James was saying, "this is required for salvation." Paul wouldn't have argued with that. Paul also taught that it was required. Paul's letters are all about how Christians should have love – they must have good works.

Those good works are the kind of works that are required for salvation. Those good works are the kind of works that come from a truly repentant heart. Those good works are the kind of works that naturally appear in someone's life if they've died with Jesus and have risen into a new life.

The works required for salvation are not the works of the Law of Moses.

For example, Paul wrote, "It is not important if a man is circumcised

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:20

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6 (NLT)

or not. The important thing is obeying God’s commands.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a bit confusing, because circumcision was in the Law of Moses – it was a command from God. Paul said it isn’t important if someone is circumcised – yet, in the same breath, he said that it is important to obey God’s commands.

In other words, in this one verse, Paul was essentially saying “you are not saved by works,” but also, “you are justified by works.” He was saying the same thing he said to the Ephesians, but also the same thing James said.

This is because there are two different types of works mentioned in the Bible. Circumcision was a work of the Law of Moses. It was something the Law told people to do – but it was simply foreshadowing what Jesus accomplished. Paul wrote about circumcision, saying, “In Christ you were also circumcised, but not with a circumcision done by hands. It was a circumcision done by Christ, which cut away the body of flesh”<sup>2</sup>

He also said, “We are the ones who are truly circumcised.”<sup>3</sup>

In other words, Jesus fulfilled circumcision. Jesus fulfilled many of the things the Law instructed people to do – the food laws, the sacrifices, the circumcision, the washings, and other ceremonial rituals. Hebrews tells us that those things were merely foreshadowing Jesus.<sup>4</sup> Paul also said those rules were a shadow of the substance that has now come.<sup>5</sup>

Those rituals, rules, special days, sacrifices, and ceremonies are the works that Paul was referring to when he said we’re not saved by works. Those things were fulfilled in Jesus. They pointed to Jesus, and they pointed to true salvation – salvation through fidelity.

With those religious laws fulfilled, the only thing left is love. As Jesus said, “Do to others what you want them to do to you. This sums up the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>6</sup>

With the religious laws fulfilled, we are left only with the laws about love. Or, in other words, good deeds – the same kind of works Paul instructed people to have, and the same kind of works James instructed people to have.

As Paul said, “the person who loves others has obeyed all the law... Love never hurts a neighbor, so loving is obeying all the law.”<sup>7</sup>

All the Law, all the prophets, and all of Paul’s instructions are summed up in love.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:19

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:11

<sup>3</sup> Philippians 3:3

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Hebrews 9:9-12, 23:26, 10:1-4

<sup>5</sup> Colossians 2:16-17

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:12

<sup>7</sup> Romans 13:8,10

Paul was not teaching us that we don't have to obey. He wasn't teaching that we don't have to have works. He wasn't warning us about legalism. He was teaching people to obey God out of loyalty and love instead of religion. He was teaching people to have good works – because good works of love fulfill what remains of the Law.

Once again, just as we saw with the Pharisees, legalism wasn't the topic. Legalism is not mentioned in Scripture. There is nowhere in Scripture that says, "you shouldn't feel like you have to obey God." That is not in Scripture. Everywhere in the Bible – including the whole of the New Testament – teaches that we must have works, we must obey God, and we must be faithful.

### **Works are Required:**

Scripture clearly teaches that we must have works. It is one of the biggest instructions found throughout the New Testament. No one taught that we are saved without works. The apostles all taught that works are required for salvation.

The clearest example is in the book of 1 John.

The letter of 1 John was written to address the lie that people don't have to obey God. It was written to say, "No – real Christians are those who obey God. Those who do not obey God are not real Christians."

Here are a few examples:

"We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, 'I know God,' but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if someone obeys his word, then in that person God's love has truly reached its goal. This is how we can be sure we are in him: Whoever says that he abides in him must walk as he walked."<sup>1</sup>

John said that we can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands.

Isn't that legalism?

The Church keeps telling us that legalism is a big problem that we should avoid – that we shouldn't feel like we must be doing certain things in order to have a right relationship with God.

Yet Scripture says the exact opposite. We can be sure that we know God if, and only if, we obey his commands.

John also said, "Anyone who claims, 'I am in the light,' but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness."<sup>2</sup>

Again – according to John, if you don't have works (works of love), then you're not saved!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:3-6

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:9

He said, “Do not love the world, or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you... The world and its desires are passing away, but the person who does what God wants lives forever.”<sup>1</sup>

According to John, if you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. But, if you do what God wants, you live forever.

If. You. Do. What. God. Wants.

Isn't that legalism?

John said, “Be sure you abide in what you heard from the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he himself promised to us – eternal life.”<sup>2</sup>

If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, then you will abide in the Son and have eternal life. What does it mean to abide in what you heard from the beginning? John answered that question in the next chapter:

“This is the message you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>3</sup>

So, John said that if you abide in *what you heard from the beginning*, you will have eternal life. And he said that *the message you have heard from the beginning* is that we must all love one another. Therefore, John taught that if you love others, and you're living a life defined by love, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father, and you will have eternal life.

If you love each other, you will have eternal life.

Isn't that legalism?

Here's another one from John. This next one is important because John saw what was coming. He knew there would be people teaching lies. He knew people would say, “You don't need to obey God in order to be saved! You just need to believe! Obedience is legalism, and you don't want to be legalistic!”

John knew false teachers would come, and he knew they would preach salvation without works. So, he said, “Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. Anyone who continues to sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has been sinning since the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil's work. All who are born of God do not continue sinning, because his seed abides in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God. So we can see who God's children are and who the devil's children are: Those who do not practice righteousness are not

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:15,17

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:24-25

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:11

God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>1</sup>

In this verse, John said, “do not let anyone deceive you.”

When the apostles said, “do not let anyone deceive you,” or “do not be deceived,” they were saying, “people are going to try to deceive you about this. People are going to try to convince you to believe the opposite of what I’m saying.”

John said, “do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous...”

In other words, John was warning us that people would come along, trying to convince us that it is possible to be righteous without doing what is right. He was warning us ahead of time that this is a lie. Those people are deceivers. They are servants of Satan. They are leading people away from the truth. Only those who obey God are righteous. The person who does not obey God is not righteous.

His warning is exactly what has happened in the Church.

Today, the Church teaches what is called *imputed righteousness*. The idea of *imputed righteousness* is that, when God looks at us, he sees the righteous life of Jesus rather than our sin. Or, in other words, Jesus lived a righteous life – and now, it’s as if we were the ones who lived that life. Essentially, the doctrine of imputed righteousness is: you can be righteous without actually doing what is right.

That’s really dumbing it down, but that’s the basic idea.

With this doctrine of imputed righteousness, it effectively makes it irrelevant whether or not a person actually lives righteously or not. The Protestant Church teaches that a Christian is righteous entirely because of what Jesus did – and it has nothing to do with whether or not they themselves live righteously.

But that’s the opposite of what John said.

John said, “do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous...” John warned us that people would come, teaching us that it’s possible to be righteous without doing what is right. He warned us that these people are false teachers. His warning is exactly what the Church teaches today, and millions believe it – even though John’s warning is right in front of them. Like the Israelites in the Old Testament, Christians were warned to not be deceived, but they’re blind to the fact that that warning was about them.

The idea of *imputed righteousness* is where Christians get the idea that we are “clothed with the righteousness of Christ.” That’s a phrase I’ve heard many times. It’s used in worship songs, Christians say it in prayer, pastors write about

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:7-10

it in books.

But it's not in the Bible.

The Bible never says we're clothed with the righteousness of Christ. It's not biblical. That phrase never once occurs in Scripture. No Christian is clothed in the righteousness of Christ. But – the Bible does tell us what Christians are wearing in God's eyes. In the book of Revelation, John told us:

“Then I heard what sounded like a great many people, like the noise of many waters, and like the noise of loud thunder. The people were saying: ‘Hallelujah! For our Lord God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him glory, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and the Lamb's bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and pure, was given to her to wear.’ (The fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.)”<sup>1</sup>

John saw the bride of Christ – the Church. Every person in all of history who will receive salvation was standing before him, wearing pure white linen.

What were they wearing?

Was it the righteousness of Christ?

No! They weren't clothed in the righteousness of Christ! They were clothed in the righteous deeds of the saints! We are the saints! We are clothed in our own righteous deeds! We are clothed in our own righteousness! As John said in his letter, “the one who does what is right is righteous.”<sup>2</sup> Those who obey God are righteous – they're clothed in their own righteousness. Obedience is essential. You cannot be righteous without obeying God.

As Paul said, “[Jesus] gave himself for us so he might pay the price to free us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>3</sup>

The Church doesn't preach the full gospel! Jesus didn't just come to grant us forgiveness – he came to set us free from wickedness, and to make us people who want to do good deeds – people who want to live a righteous life. Therefore, on judgment day – on the day of the marriage of the Lamb – we will be clothed in our own righteous deeds. We will be clothed in righteousness because we will have lived a righteous life, obeying the commands of God.

Righteous works are required! Righteous works are part of faith – part of fidelity, loyalty, and reliability.

The Bible is clear: on judgment day, you will give an account for your *actions* – not your *beliefs*. When John saw a vision of judgment day, he said, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne. Then books

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 19:6-8

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:7

<sup>3</sup> Titus 2:14

were opened, and another book, which is the book of life was opened. The dead were judged by what they had done, which was recorded in the books... Each person was judged by what he had done.”<sup>1</sup>

On judgment day, the books will be opened, and the dead will be judged by what they have done. They won’t be judged by what they believed. They won’t be judged by who they trusted. They won’t be judged by what information they accepted as true. They will be judged by what they had done. They will be judged by their actions. They will be judged by their works.

Jesus said the same thing in the parable of the sheep and the goats, and in many other parables.<sup>2</sup> Judgment day will be a day where the righteous are separated from the unrighteous based on how they lived. They will be separated based on their works – not their beliefs.

John also said, “...we can be without fear on the day of judgment because...”

What would the Church say there?

“Because we believe in Jesus. Because Jesus died for our sins. Because we trusted Jesus. Because Jesus did everything for us.”

But that’s not what John said. John said, “...we can be without fear on the day of judgment because in this world we are like him.”<sup>3</sup>

The only ones who can be without fear on the day of judgment are those who lived like Jesus in this life. We can be without fear on the day of judgment if we obeyed God in our lives – following Jesus and living in loyalty, fidelity, and faithfulness. We can be without fear if we were reliable and lived the kind of life God wants. We can be without fear if we are children of God – people who inherited God’s nature and lived truly good and holy lives.

Jesus gave his life to make us people who want to obey him – who want to live our lives doing good deeds to meet urgent needs. He ransomed us to make us people who obey him – not out of law, but out of love.

That’s what Paul was getting at – our works are not a list of rules we have to follow. Our works are when we obey out of love. When we live our lives thinking, “Man, I love him! And because I love him, I’m going to obey him. I’m going to do what he wants, I’m going to do what he likes!”

John said, “Loving God means obeying his commands. And God’s commands are not too burdensome for us.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 20:12-13

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:24-27, 13:47-50, 24:42-51, 25:31-46; Luke 12:16-21, 16:19-31

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:17

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 5:3

Loving God means obeying his commands! And, no – his commands are *not impossible* for us to obey. Don't let anyone convince you otherwise.

Jesus said the same thing – he said it three times in just a few verses:

“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”<sup>1</sup>

“Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me...”<sup>2</sup>

“If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”<sup>3</sup>

Loving God means we obey him. If you say you love God, but you don't obey him, you're a liar – you don't love him. What other relationship in your life would you say you love someone, but everything you do is something they hate, and you're doing it anyway, and you don't care that they hate it?

That's not love.

Love isn't a feeling. It's not just saying, “I love God in my heart.” It's not just affection.

Love is action. Loving God means obeying his commands.

So, to conclude, legalism is not something Christians need to be worried about. Legalism is not a biblical topic. It is not something the Bible tells you to be worried about. It's something that men have made up to support their theology that says you're saved by belief, not by fidelity.

Scripture says you're saved by fidelity. That's what the Greek word means. So, let's stop talking about legalism; let's stop bringing this up as an argument for why we don't need to obey God. If you go through life saying, “I don't need to obey God,” he will tell you, “I never knew you. Depart from me, you who practice unrighteousness.”<sup>4</sup>

Christians keep bringing up legalism as an objection to the idea that we must obey God in order to be saved. But legalism isn't in the Bible! It's not biblical! It is a man-made tradition. Just like the Pharisees, we neglect the commands of God for the sake of our own traditions. We look at the things Jesus said we should be doing, and we say, “I don't need to do that because that would be legalism.”

Legalism isn't in the Bible. Jesus never warned about legalism. Paul never warned against legalism. The apostles and Jesus all taught the opposite. They warned about lawlessness. They warned about being unfaithful. They warned about being deceived by people who would tell us that we don't have

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:15

<sup>2</sup> John 14:21

<sup>3</sup> John 14:23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23



to obey God to be righteous.

We are expected to obey the commands of God. We shouldn't be concerned about legalism when we're talking about things the Bible directly tells us to do.

We are expected to obey God. We are expected to do what Jesus taught. To do that, we must make sure that the commands we obey are the things Jesus actually taught. The only way to know for sure is to read his words for ourselves, paying attention to what he said our lives should look like.

We need to make sure we're following what Jesus taught, and we need to stop thinking that it's important for us to feel like we don't have to.

Because we do have to.

Scripture teaches that you do have to follow him. You do have to obey him. That's why he said he will turn people away who call him Lord if they practiced unrighteousness.<sup>1</sup> If you practice unrighteousness – if you're living a life that's not obedient to what Jesus taught – you will be turned away. Legalism is not something you should be worried about. If you are following the commands of God, you are doing right.

No one in the Bible was rebuked for trying to obey God too hard.

The teachers who warn us about legalism are like the Pharisees, and Jesus told the Pharisees, "You travel across land and sea to make one convert. When you make that convert, you make him twice the son of hell that you are."<sup>2</sup>

That's what is happening in the Church. People are being taught that they should not feel an obligation to obey God. They are being taught that they can be saved without obeying God. They are being taught that they can have eternal life without living righteously. They are being taught that they're clothed in the righteousness of Jesus, instead of their own righteousness.

Christians are traveling across land and see to make converts – but they're converting people to follow their human traditions and their human teaching. They're not converting them to live righteous lives and obey God out of fidelity, loyalty and faithfulness.

Now, as I said at the beginning of this chapter, there are two objections Christians tend to bring up. This was one of them: legalism. In the next chapter, I'll address the second objection that people tend to bring up, and then we'll move on to talk about what it actually means to obey the commands of Jesus. Because the only kind of "legalism" that might be an issue is if the commands you're obeying are only human commands, man-made traditions,

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 23:15

and made-up rules. As Jesus told the Pharisees, “you rejected what God said for the sake of your own tradition.”<sup>1</sup>

This does happen. There are people who come along and say, “You have to do this, and you have to do that.” But they aren’t teaching the same commands that Jesus taught. They’re teaching commands that men have made up. When you start feeling like you have to follow all of those rules and traditions, you could call that legalism, and that is something we want to avoid. So, we want to be able to distinguish between what Jesus wants us to be doing verses what men have brought in and turned into religion. So, in the next chapter we’ll talk about the second objection that Christians tend to bring, and then in the chapter after that, we’ll talk about what it means to obey Jesus and not human traditions.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:6

# Chapter 7

## Lies Christians Believe About Condemnation

As we talk about faith, repentance, obedience, and the importance of works, many Christians will object that this is unbiblical. Most Christians have been taught their whole lives that works are not required for salvation – so, if someone says that works are required, they often oppose this position.

The biggest objection is the topic of legalism. We looked at that in the last chapter.

The second objection is the idea of condemnation.

When talking about the necessity of obedience, Christians typically say, “This makes me feel condemned. This gives me condemnation.”

What do they mean when they say this?

Typically, what they mean is, “This makes me feel guilty. This makes me feel bad and guilty because I look at my life and I see that I’m not obeying, and I see times that I fail to obey, and then I feel condemned.”

Christians typically respond to the feeling of condemnation by saying, “I need to remember that I’m forgiven! I need to remember that I have forgiveness! If I focus on things I’m supposed to be doing, I feel guilty and forget that I’m forgiven!”

This objection holds a lot of Christians back from ever growing.

This chapter is going to sound a little harsh. My intention is not to offend anyone or upset anyone. My intention is to challenge your current beliefs. If you are believing the wrong thing, and responding the wrong way, your eternal salvation may be on the line. To me, that is no trivial matter. The things in this chapter (and the rest of this book) are matters of life and death, so I will not mince my words, and I will not sugar-coat it. You must know the truth, and you must be told if you are believing lies. If this chapter upsets you, offends you, or challenges what you believe, I simply ask you to go to Scripture yourself to determine what is true and what is false.

When discussing condemnation, one of the first verses to look at is in the book of 1 John. The book of 1 John is essential for our understanding of what true Christianity is, because John wrote this letter to address false Christianity that began spreading in the latter half of the first century. He was

addressing the fact that people were teaching lies and teaching a false Christianity. So, he wrote his letter to establish what is real and what is not – what a real Christian looks like, and what a false Christian looks like. And, in doing this, one of the issues he addressed is condemnation:

“By this we will know that we belong to the truth. If our hearts condemn us, our hearts can be reassured before him. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a verse a lot of Christians misunderstand. They think this verse means that whenever they feel condemned about their disobedience or sin, they need to just remember that they have peace with God.

I heard a sermon once – over a decade ago – and it stuck with me. The man preached from this verse, saying, “When it says that God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything, that could be something that makes us feel even more condemned – because we tend to think of all the sin in our lives. But really, it means that God remembers the gospel. He remembers everything – he remembers that you are saved by Jesus. That is what you need to remember. When your heart condemns you, you have peace with God, because God remembers everything, including your forgiveness – he doesn’t just remember your sin.”

When I first heard that sermon, it really encouraged me because I was at a time in my life where I felt condemned all the time. I looked at my life, and I knew I wasn’t doing what the Bible said to do. I felt guilty. I felt the weight of my disobedience. I saw my sin, and I knew I wasn’t obeying God. When I felt this guilt, I would remember this verse and this sermon. I would remember that I had peace with God. I would remember that God remembers more than just my sin – he remembers the gospel. He remembers that I’m forgiven – even when I fail to remember.

But this isn’t what this verse meant. This is false teaching.

This verse is being plucked completely out of context and is forced to fit the theology preached by the Church today – the theology that we are saved by grace alone, by belief alone, and that works are not required. They take individual verses (like this one) out of context to make them sound like they say we’re saved by believing, and that our obedience is not essential for our salvation. They distort the Scriptures to make it sound like obedience is not required.

But that’s not what the apostles taught. That’s not what Scripture says. We are not saved by belief – we’re saved by *pístis* – fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness, and reliability. If you have belief, but you don’t obey, then you’re unfaithful – you don’t have *pístis*, and therefore, you don’t have salvation or forgiveness!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:19-20

If you don't have *pístis*, then you're unfaithful – you're an adulterer – you're an unfaithful bride to the bridegroom.

Christian teachers teach that this verse means that when you see sin in your life, you must remember the gospel, and you must remember that you're forgiven. But that's not what this verse is saying. That's the opposite of what it's saying.

Look at the context!

Earlier in the same chapter, John said, "...anyone who abides in Christ does not go on sinning. Anyone who goes on sinning has neither seen him nor known him. Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous. Anyone who continues to sin belongs to the devil...Those who are God's children do not continue sinning... In this way it is apparent who God's children are and who the devil's children are: Those who do not do what is right are not God's children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God's children."<sup>1</sup>

He said, "We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love is still dead."<sup>2</sup>

So, John clearly taught that true Christians do not continue living in sin. Their lives change. They stop living in sin, and they start living in righteousness. Anyone who continues in sin isn't a Christian – which means they don't have forgiveness! Those who do not do what is right are not God's children – they are children of the devil. God's children will love one another.

Then John said, "This is how we know what real love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. So we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Suppose someone has the world's possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but does not help. Then God's love is not living in that person. My children, we should love people not only with words and talk, but by showing true love through our actions. By this we will know that we belong to the truth. If our hearts condemn us, our hearts can be reassured before him. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything."<sup>3</sup>

According to John, real love is not a feeling. Real love is not just expressed in words. Real love is not some affection you have in your heart. Real love is action. If you see someone in need, and you have the means to help, but you don't help, then God's love doesn't live in you. This is the kind of love true Christians will have for their brothers and sisters – a kind of love that helps others – that puts their interests first. Or, as we saw in the last chapter – "good deeds to meet urgent needs."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:8-10

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:14

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:16-20

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Titus 3:14

This is the context. John told his audience that true Christians will live a life defined by love – doing good deeds and meeting urgent needs. Then he said, “By this we will know that we belong to the truth.”

By what?

By loving one another through action. By having good works. By doing what is right. By meeting the needs of the brothers and sisters.

By living this way, we can know that we belong to the truth.

Why?

Because as John just said, “the one who does what is right is righteous...”<sup>1</sup> and “In this way it is apparent who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not do what is right are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>2</sup>

By showing true love, where we lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters, just as Christ laid down his life for us, we can know that we belong to the truth, because that’s what real Christians do – that’s what God’s children do.

And *then* if our hearts condemn us, we can have peace with God because God knows everything. We can have peace with God only if we’re obeying him. John didn’t say we can have peace with God despite our disobedience. He said our hearts can be reassured and we can have peace with God if we obey him and live in love.

John was saying, “If you are following the way of truth, living in love, and obeying the commands of God, then if your heart still tries to condemn you, you can have peace with God. You can have reassurance before God. God knows everything! He knows that you are faithful to him!”

John was not saying that you can be reassured before God if you’re disobeying him. He was not saying that you just need to remember that you’re forgiven even when you disobey. No – he was saying that you can have assurance before God by living in love. If you live in true, biblical, radical love, then if your heart condemns you, you can have peace with God.

He was not trying to give you assurance before God if you’re still living in sin. He was saying that you can be reassured before God if you are obeying him.

He made this even more clear as he continued:

“If our hearts condemn us, our hearts can be reassured before him. God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God. And we receive from him

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:7

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:10

what we ask for *because we obey his commands and do what pleases him*. This is his command: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded. *The people who obey God's commands abide in God, and God abides in them.*<sup>1</sup>

If our hearts do not condemn us, and we have boldness before God, then we will receive what we ask for. Why? Because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. The people who obey God are the ones who abide in God.

Christians take one tiny little verse completely out of context to make it say the exact opposite of what it actually says! John was clear both before and after this verse that he was talking about those who *obey* God. He was not trying to give reassurance to those who continue to disobey God.

If your life is marked by faithfulness to God, where you give your entire life to obey God, then you can have reassurance before God. If your life is marked by love – true love as defined by John – then you can have reassurance before God. If you're living that way and your heart begins to condemn you, then you can have peace with God. Your heart is lying to you. You can know that God sees your faithfulness.

John was not saying that you can have assurance before God even if you disobey him and ignore the needs of the brothers and sisters around you. He was not telling you to just remember that you're forgiven as you continue blatantly ignoring the commands of God. He wasn't saying you have peace with God, even if you continue in sin. No – he said true Christians don't continue in sin. He said if you're disobeying God and ignoring the needs of the brothers and sisters, you're not a child of God – you're a child of the devil! His whole point in this chapter was that true Christians will obey God! His whole point was that you must obey!

But the Church today ignores the point of what John was saying, and they look for what will make them feel better. They preach the opposite of John's point. They preach that it's possible to have forgiveness even when you continue to disobey God. They teach that if you disobey God and feel guilty, you just need to remember that you're forgiven. That's not biblical. That's not what Scripture teaches. Scripture teaches that if you're going through life, disobeying the commands of God, you're not forgiven. You feel guilty because part of the job of the Holy Spirit is to convict people about sin.<sup>2</sup> The Holy Spirit convicts people about sin, and that makes them feel guilty – because they are guilty!

According to Scripture, if you feel condemned because you're not

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:21-24, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 16:8-11

obeying the commands of Jesus, it is because you *are* condemned. You're guilty! You are living in rebellion, disobeying God, following your father – the devil!

That is harsh, and most people don't want to hear it. So, they turn to teachers who tickle their ears and tell them the things they want to hear. Paul warned us, "...the time will come when people will not put up with the true teaching but will find many more teachers who please them by saying the things they want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and will begin to follow false stories."<sup>1</sup>

Paul warned us that the time would come when people would turn away from the truth because they want to hear something different.

What do people want to hear?

People want to hear, "Remember that you're forgiven. Remember that you're forgiven. You have to just get it into your head that you're forgiven! God remembers that you're forgiven – you have to remember it, too!"

No. You have to get it into your head that you must obey Jesus. You have to get it into your head that you're saved by fidelity to him – not just by believing. You're saved by dying with him and leaving behind your old ways. You're saved by rising with him into a new life where you live righteously because you follow the Spirit.

This brings us to the second verse people use when talking about condemnation:

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

Christians are quick to point to this verse whenever they start feeling guilty about their sin. If they see that they're not doing the things the Bible says to do, and if they start to feel guilty about it, they quickly quote this verse to remind themselves that they are not condemned.

But there's a problem: This isn't what the verse said in the original Greek. In the original Greek, there is an entire phrase that has been removed from our English Bibles.

In the original Greek, it said, "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who are not walking according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."<sup>3</sup>

Paul did not say, "There's no condemnation for everyone who calls themselves a Christian." He didn't say, "There's no condemnation for those who say they believe in Jesus." And he didn't say, "There is no condemnation

<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Romans 8:1

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:1 (translated here directly from the Greek text as found in The Interlinear Bible, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Jay P. Green, Sr., 1986)



for those who believe in Jesus, but continue sinning.”

No. He said, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who are not walking according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”

In other words, there is no condemnation for those whose actions have changed – who no longer live their old lives, but instead live the new life – the life led by the Spirit – a life marked by righteousness. That’s what this verse said in the Greek. That’s what Paul actually wrote. The phrase is removed in most translations because Paul repeated the phrase a few sentences later, in verse four. Translators arbitrarily decided it must be a mistake to have the phrase written twice. But the phrase is included in the overwhelming majority of manuscripts available to us. The translators had no business removing it from the Bible.

Furthermore, if you read Romans chapters 6, 7, and 8 as one cohesive message, it’s clear this is what Paul was teaching: Those who are joined to Jesus have died with him and have risen into a new life, where they are no longer slaves of sin.<sup>1</sup> Through Jesus, they died to the Law, and now they bear fruit for God by following the Spirit, whereas the Law had only stirred up sin within them.<sup>2</sup> But now, in Christ Jesus, they no longer follow their flesh, they follow the Spirit – and so, they are children of God.<sup>3</sup>

There is no condemnation for those who walk according to the Spirit. Why?

Because, as Paul explained to the Galatians, “walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”<sup>4</sup> If you walk by the Spirit, you won’t gratify the desires of the flesh – you won’t do what your flesh wants. In other words, if you walk by the Spirit, you won’t continue in sin – your actions will change – you will do what God says is right! You will become his child, inherit his nature, and live as he lives. Therefore, there’s no condemnation! You’re not guilty! You can be without fear on the day of judgment, because in this world you were like him!<sup>5</sup>

Even if you’re not convinced that there’s a phrase missing in the Bible, the English version still says there is no condemnation “for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

As John said, “anyone who abides in Christ does not go on sinning. Anyone who goes on sinning has neither seen him nor known him.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 7

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Romans 8:1-17

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 5:16 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 1 John 4:17

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:6

According to John, who are the people who are in Christ Jesus?

This gets back to what the entire book of 1 John is about – true Christians are people who obey. True Christians do not continue to disobey the commands of God. True Christians do not continue to disobey the things Jesus taught. True Christians live their lives completely for Jesus – obeying him and finding every possible way to do what he wants.

“There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” because “anyone who abides in Christ does not go on sinning.”

It’s not, “there is no condemnation because you need to remember that you are forgiven, even though you keep on sinning.” No – because those who keep on sinning are children of the devil. No one who continues sinning is a child of God!<sup>1</sup>

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus – who do not continue sinning! They live for God and they love their brothers and sisters. They love with a true biblical love (which we will look at in more detail in a later chapter). They love with a deep, powerful love that changes their lives – it changes the way they think about everything.

There is no condemnation for those people.

*Condemnation* is about whether you will be found guilty on judgment day. As we mentioned in the last chapter, John said that on judgment day, the books will be opened, and people will be judged by what they did.<sup>2</sup> He said we can have no fear on judgment day because in this life we are like Jesus.<sup>3</sup> There is no condemnation for those who are like Jesus in this life. There is no condemnation for those who are clothed in righteousness – the righteous deeds of the saints.<sup>4</sup>

If we keep going through life, disobeying the commands of Jesus, and we feel condemned, it is because we are condemned.

The majority of people who “struggle with condemnation” are struggling because they are condemned! They’re guilty! They love this life. They love this world. They love pleasure. They love comfort. They love the things this life is offering them too much to obey Jesus. Or, they’re too busy with the things of this life to obey Jesus. Or, they’re too distracted with the things of this life to obey Jesus. Or, they want something that this world or this life is offering them too much to obey Jesus. Or, they don’t want to let go of their comfort in order to obey Jesus.

But, they don’t want to go to hell.

They feel condemned because they recognize that they’re not doing

<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:6-10; 5:18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Revelation 20:12-13

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 4:17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Revelation 19:8

the things Jesus said to do. They feel condemned because they are condemned. That's the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

But instead of listening and following the Spirit, they quench the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> They quench the Spirit by telling themselves over and over that they are forgiven. They quench the Spirit by reminding themselves of the false gospel they received from men. They quench the Spirit by listening to the false stories of preachers who tickle their ears, giving them false hope and good feelings. They quench the Spirit by telling themselves, "I'm saved by faith, and not by works."<sup>2</sup> But they ignore the fact that James said, "You're saved by works, and not by faith."<sup>3</sup> They don't even recognize that, according to their theology, these two verses contradict one another.

They keep telling themselves that they're forgiven. They keep telling themselves that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus... but they're not in Christ Jesus! John said, "the people who obey God's commands abide in God, and God abides in them."<sup>4</sup>

According to John, you're in Christ Jesus if you're obeying God – doing what he said to do.

John also said, "As for you be sure you abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he himself promised to us – eternal life."<sup>5</sup>

According to John, you're only in Christ Jesus if you're abiding in what was taught from the beginning. You only have the promise of eternal life if you're abiding in the Son and in the Father – and you're only abiding in them if you're abiding in what was taught from the beginning.

What was taught from the beginning?

Believe in Jesus?

Trust him?

Have faith?

No. John told us what was taught from the beginning: "This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other."<sup>6</sup>

Immediately after saying this, John explained what real love is (in the verse we read earlier). Real love is not a feeling. It isn't expressed in words. It isn't just *being kind*. Real love is when you lay down your entire life. It's when you help those in need.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Thessalonians 5:19

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Ephesians 2:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. James 2:24

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:24

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:24-25

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:11

There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But too many people are going through life, thinking they are in Christ Jesus despite the fact that they don't obey him.

The Bible says so plainly, so clearly, and so many times, that you are not in Christ Jesus if you do not obey him.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said, "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I say?"<sup>2</sup>

He said on judgment day, many will say, "Lord, Lord," and he will say, "Depart from me, you who practice unrighteousness."<sup>3</sup>

So many people think he is their Lord. They think they are in Christ Jesus. They think they are forgiven. And their preachers tell them to remind themselves of these "facts". But they're not facts; they're lies. Because if you don't obey him, you're not forgiven.

The first step in accepting Jesus is repentance – you change the way you live.<sup>4</sup> When God shows you sin in your life, you must repent. That doesn't just mean you stop sinning. Repentance doesn't just mean you stop doing the bad things. It means you start doing something different – you start doing the right things.

You must start obeying what Jesus taught.

John the Baptist preached repentance.<sup>5</sup> He told people to change the way they live. His message was not just that people should stop sinning – but that they should start doing what is right.<sup>6</sup> But Scripture adds something about repentance that often goes unnoticed. It says, "He went all over the country around the Jordan River preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."<sup>7</sup>

John was preaching repentance – for the forgiveness of sin.

His job was to prepare the way of the Lord – to get people to repent, to change the way they were living so they would be ready to follow Jesus.<sup>8</sup> But it says that their repentance resulted in forgiveness! It wasn't belief for forgiveness of sins. It wasn't faith for forgiveness of sins. It wasn't Jesus' death on the cross for forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins comes through

<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-27, 12:48-50; 21:43, 24:45-51, 25:31-46; Luke 6:46-49, 8:21, 11:28, 12:42-46, 14:33; John 5:29, 8:31-32, 12:47-49; Acts 26:19-20; Romans 3:31, 6:1-8:17, 12:1-21; 1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:13-17, 6:7-10; Ephesians 2:10; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; Titus 1:16, 2:11-14, 3:8, 3:14; Hebrews 10:24, 10:32-39, 11:1-40, 12:14-17; James 1:22-27, 2:14-26, 3:13, 4:3-5; 1 Peter 2:11-12, 3:9-14; 1 John 1:5-7, 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 2:15-17, 2:24-26, 2:29, 3:4-10, 3:16-24, 4:8, 4:19-21, 5:2-5, 5:18... and many more.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:46

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 2:38

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 19:4

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Luke 3:11

<sup>7</sup> Luke 3:3

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-4; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23

repentance.

Furthermore, this wasn't something that changed after Jesus died. Some people might say, "well, John the Baptist was technically still in the Old Covenant, because Jesus hadn't died yet." Sure! But after Jesus rose from the dead, he said the same thing!

"Then Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He said to them, 'It is written that the Messiah would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in his name to all nations, starting at Jerusalem.'"<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, people receive forgiveness of sins through repentance! Not only that, but according to Jesus, this is the message that would be preached to all the nations... which is why Paul summarized his message by saying, "I began telling people that they should repent and do works to show they really had changed."<sup>2</sup>

And when Peter preached on Pentecost, he told the people to, "Repent and be baptized, each one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."<sup>3</sup> Later, after healing the cripple in the Temple, Peter also said, "So you must repent! Turn back to God, and he will forgive your sins."<sup>4</sup>

The message preached in Scripture is that we receive forgiveness through repentance! Repentance means you change your life! It means everything changes! It means you stop doing what is wrong *and* you start doing what is right!

If you don't repent, then you're not in Christ Jesus! If you don't repent, then there is still condemnation!

So, to all those people who would say, "this makes me feel condemned," if you're not obeying Jesus, you are still condemned. If you're not obeying Jesus, you're believing a false gospel. If you're not obeying Jesus, you're one of those people Paul said would leave the truth and follow teachers who tell them things they want to hear. You're trying to remind yourself that you have forgiveness when you don't. You're trying to remind yourself that Jesus paid for your sins, when you haven't been joined to Jesus in the first place. Your old life hasn't died! You're still living! Christ isn't living in you!

The Church today preaches a false gospel, telling people that they can continue living in this world, for this world, and for themselves, as long as they believe in Jesus. Countless millions are believing this lie, following false teachers, and are headed toward destruction. They are anticipating the day

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 24:45-47

<sup>2</sup> Acts 26:20

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:38

<sup>4</sup> Acts 3:19

when they will see Jesus face to face, but they will only hear him say, “I never knew you.” The warning God gave apostate Israel is the same warning for apostate Christians: “Woe to you who want the day of the LORD to come. Why do you want that day to come? It will bring darkness for you, not light... the day of the Lord will bring darkness, not light; it will be deep gloom, not brightness.”<sup>1</sup>

Christians want the day of the Lord to come. They want Jesus to return. They eagerly watch for his coming. But they live in apostasy. That day won't bring light for them. It will bring darkness. It will bring gloom. It will be a day when they are forever thrown out of God's presence because they didn't obey him.

The gospel preached in the Church is wrong! Forgiveness is not granted to people who don't change! Following Jesus costs everything! If you haven't died with him, you can't live with him. If you're trying to remind yourself that you're forgiven when you're not obeying him, you're deceived! You cannot have life with Jesus unless you give up this life. You will not be welcomed into his Kingdom unless you stop living for this life and live for him.

I recently heard someone say that she was frustrated with a family member who wouldn't become a Christian. She said, “Why won't he become a Christian? It's not like it will cost him anything. All he has to do is believe!”

This is not biblical! This is the exact opposite of what Jesus said! He said following him costs everything!<sup>2</sup> Unless you die, you cannot have life!

Becoming a Christian is not about going to heaven. Jesus isn't just a ticket into heaven. Jesus provided a way for us to be set free from slavery to sin so that we can live a new life.<sup>3</sup> If we don't do that – if we don't have our old lives die, join ourselves to Jesus, follow him and obey him faithfully – then we don't have forgiveness, and we do still have condemnation!

If you feel condemned because you're disobeying Jesus, it's because you *are* condemned! It's because the Holy Spirit is condemning you – pleading with you to repent! But if you keep refusing to repent, you will get to judgment day and say, “Lord, Lord,” but Jesus will say, “I never knew you. You practiced unrighteousness. You refused to come to me to have life.”<sup>4</sup>

Scripture clearly teaches that true Christians will obey Jesus. Jesus compared it to passing from death to life. He said a seed must fall to the ground

<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:18-20

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:39; Luke 14:26-27, 14:33

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 8:31-34; Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 5:24; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

and die in order to have life.<sup>1</sup> Unless we give up everything in this life, we can't have life.

If we want to have forgiveness and know we're not condemned, then we must start obeying Jesus. If we're not obeying him, we could tell ourselves that we're forgiven all day long every day until we die... it doesn't make it true.

Just because your favorite preacher tells you to remember that you're forgiven, even if you're not obeying, it doesn't make it true. The gospel preached in Scripture was not, "say a sinner's prayer and then you'll go to heaven someday." The gospel preached in Scripture was that you must change the way you live. Everything about your life must die, and you must live entirely for God and his kingdom – doing what God says is right.

Everything changes when you follow Jesus: You stop living for this world. You stop living for comfort. You stop living for pleasure. You stop living the American dream. You stop spending your time watching TV, watching the news, and getting wrapped up in the cares and politics of this world. You stop being a part of this world.

Everything must change.

So many people feel condemned because nothing has really changed in their lives. They don't obey the commands of Jesus. They don't do what God says is right. They don't live in true, biblical love. Their lives look no different than the world around them.

They feel condemned when they don't do what they know they should do, because they don't really feel like doing it. Paul said that Jesus gave himself "to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds."<sup>2</sup> Yet today, most Christians aren't always wanting to do good deeds. They're wanting what's best for themselves. They want a comfortable life. Then they feel condemned when they keep choosing to ignore the good deeds they know they're supposed to be doing. So, they keep telling themselves that they're forgiven, and they keep listening to sermons and reading books that tell them they're forgiven.

Again, as Paul said, "...the time will come when people will not listen to the true teaching but will find many more teachers who please them by saying the things they want to hear. They will stop listening to the truth and will begin to follow false stories. But you should control yourself at all times, endure hardships, do the work of an evangelist, and complete all the duties of a servant of God."<sup>3</sup>

Paul predicted that this time would come. He knew people would turn

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 12:24-25

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 4:3-5

away from the message that was preached by Jesus and the apostles. They all preached that we must obey Jesus. But he knew the time would come when people would surround themselves with teachers who teach a different message. He knew people would surround themselves with men who teach what they want to hear.

What do people want to hear?

They want to hear, “You’re forgiven. You’re forgiven. Just remember you’re forgiven. You keep sinning? You’re forgiven. Just remember you’re forgiven. You’re forgiven by believing. You don’t have to obey. You’re forgiven. Just remember you’re forgiven. Try to do a few nice things here and there, but remember you’re forgiven when you don’t.”

This is what people want to hear because it makes them feel good. When they keep sinning and the Holy Spirit convicts them, they fill their ears with this false gospel until they’ve satiated their fears.

Paul warned us about this. He said people would find teachers who tell them what they want to hear. But then he immediately contrasted that by saying, “But you – do the work of a servant of God.”

Why did Paul immediately contrast the message of the false teachers with an instruction to do the work of a servant of God?

Because true Christians will be doing work. They will be obeying. They will be doing what is right. They won’t continue living in sin or living for their own best interests.

Don’t listen to all the preachers who preach that you can be saved without doing anything. Don’t believe you can be forgiven without obeying Jesus.

From cover to cover, Scripture teaches that we must obey God.

We were warned by the apostles, and the Lord Jesus himself that false teachers would be in our midst. We were warned that they would teach lies that would lead people to destruction. We were warned that many people would believe their lies.

Today, many Christians believe the lie that they can be saved without works. They dismiss the conviction of the Holy Spirit by finding teachers who tell them, “Remember you’re forgiven.” Meanwhile, Scripture says that if you’re not following Jesus, you’re not forgiven. If you haven’t repented, you don’t have forgiveness.

Many people think they’re forgiven only because they’ve accepted a false gospel. They think they’re forgiven because they’ve accepted a gospel that tells them they’re saved by believing in Jesus. But Scripture teaches that we’re saved by fidelity to Jesus.

You’re not saved by just believing. You’re saved by fidelity. You’re saved by faithfulness. You’re saved by loyalty and reliability. You’re saved by



forsaking everything else and clinging only to Jesus because you love him. You're saved by obeying the commands of Jesus and the commands of God because you love him. And only those who obey him truly love him. If you don't obey him, then you don't love him.<sup>1</sup>

So, to the objection that says, "Well, this makes me feel condemned," the answer is, if you're not obeying Jesus, you are condemned. Whether you feel condemned or not does not determine what is true. Whether you like the message or not doesn't determine what is true.

If you feel condemned, there's an answer!

Repent!

Change your life!

Change the way you're living!

Change everything about what is important you!

Only one thing is truly important!

But as long as you don't repent and change your life to make the kingdom of God the only thing that's important to you, you are condemned. That's what Scripture teaches. That's what the apostles all taught. That's what Jesus taught. They warned you to not follow those teachers who teach otherwise. They warned you that if you do, you will follow them into destruction. They warned you that those false teachers would be everywhere, and that many would be deceived by them. They warned you to stay away from them.

Don't listen to the people who teach that you don't have to obey. They are liars. Paul called them "servants of Satan."<sup>2</sup> They're teaching a false gospel. Paul warned us that Christians would believe a false gospel, they would believe in a false Jesus, and they would receive a false spirit.<sup>3</sup> Do not become one of those people. Make sure what you believe and what you are doing lines up with what Scripture teaches.

What the Church teaches today is a false gospel. It's a gospel of lawlessness. It's a gospel that says you don't need to obey. It's a gospel that says you're saved by believing. It says you're saved purely by what Jesus did, and you don't have to do anything.

That is not what Scripture teaches.

You do have to do something – you must obey him. You must forsake everything and follow him. You are saved by fidelity to Jesus.

If you feel condemned because you're not obeying him, it's because

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 14:15, 14:21, 14:23; 1 John 5:3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:3-4

you are condemned.

If you *are* obeying him – if your life is all about obeying Jesus, and your life is centered around him – if everything has changed, and your perspective is on the kingdom – if your life is defined by loving the brothers and sisters in action – if you are dedicating your life to doing good deeds to meet urgent needs because that’s what Jesus wants you to do, and you love him – if that’s what defines you, not just something you do occasionally – if you build your life around living this way so that you can maximize your effectiveness – if this is what defines your life, and your heart still condemns you, then you can be reassured before God, you can have peace with God, you can come before God with confidence, and you can receive what you ask for because you obey his commands.<sup>1</sup>

The true Christian life is not for those who merely believe. It’s for those who obey. It’s for those who follow Jesus and obey him wholeheartedly. It’s for those who love the Lord their God with all their heart, all their soul, all their mind, and all their strength. It’s for those who love with more than just emotions and feelings. It’s for those who prove their love through obedience. Those who obey him are the ones who truly love him. If you don’t obey him, you don’t truly love him.<sup>2</sup>

If you are condemned because you’re guilty, then repent.

Change the way you’re living.

Stop telling yourself that you’re forgiven when you’re not – because that will not end well for you. And if you are living righteously – obeying the commands of Jesus, obeying the commands of God – and your heart condemns you, then you can have peace before God. Go before him with confidence. God knows everything; he knows that you’re faithful to him.

Finally, there might be one other type of person. This last type of person is one who feels condemned (or justified!) because they don’t know the difference between the commands of Jesus and human traditions.

Growing up in the Church, it is difficult to know the difference between what Jesus actually wants us to do, and what the Church tells us we should do. They’re usually very different things!

So, we need to know: What does it mean to obey Jesus as opposed to just following human traditions?

If we feel guilty because we’re not following human traditions, then we need to recognize them for what they truly are: they’re just human traditions!

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 14:15, 14:21, 14:23; 1 John 5:3

Stop feeling condemned about those things! Or, on the flip-side, if we feel justified because we're diligently obeying things that are only human traditions, we need to realize that we might not be doing what God actually wants – and therefore, we might not be justified at all.

In the next chapter, we will look at the commands of Jesus and some of the traditions of men. When Scripture tells us we need to obey the commands of God and the commands of Jesus, what are those commands? What should we be doing?

After that, in the following chapters, we will dive into what those commands look like practically.

I know this chapter may have seemed a bit harsh. But, I hope it convicts you. If you have been dismissing the importance of obedience because it makes you feel condemned, I hope this chapter has convicted you enough to at least go check it out for yourself to see what Scripture teaches.

Stop listening to preachers. Go to Scripture and find out for yourself what it says. Stop following men. Stop following people who tell you things that make you feel good. Stop listening to people who tell you what you want to hear. On judgment day, what you wanted to hear might not be what you really wanted to hear.

What you need is the truth. Sometimes the truth hurts. But you don't want to get to judgment day having believed a lie because that was what was most comfortable. Go find the truth for yourself. If you go to Scripture, willing to give up everything if that's what Scripture tells you to do, and you ask God to teach you, he will. He will lead you into all truth.<sup>1</sup> Jesus said the Holy Spirit will teach you everything.

So, let the Holy Spirit be your teacher, and go find out if you're forgiven or not.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 14:25-26, 16:12-15

# Chapter 8

## Lies Christians Believe About The Christian Life

A few chapters ago, we read this verse: “Jesus answered, ‘And why do you refuse to obey God’s command for the sake of your traditions? You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The things they teach are nothing but human rules.’”<sup>1</sup>

In this passage, Jesus told the Pharisees that they had abandoned the things God said to do. They weren’t obeying God – they were only following human traditions.

The Pharisees didn’t think of themselves this way. They thought they obeyed God. Everyone around them thought they obeyed God. They were considered the most devout people in all of Israel. They tried harder than everyone else to obey God. But Jesus said they were completely neglecting the commands of God, and they were only following human tradition. Just like Sardis, the Pharisees had a reputation that they were alive – but they were dead.<sup>2</sup>

The important question Christians need to ask is this: Are we like the Pharisees, or are we like the early Church? What does it mean to be a Christian? Or, in other words, what are the things a Christian should do? What does it mean to obey the commands of God? What should a Christian life look like on a day-to-day basis?

We want to make sure we’re not like the Pharisees. We want to make sure we don’t replace the things God wants with our own human traditions and rituals.

As I grew up in Church, I thought this is what the Christian life should look like:

- Going to church on Sunday
- Reading the Bible in the mornings

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:3, 15:6-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:1

## DEAD CHURCH

- Praying
- Singing worship songs on Sunday, or on my own
- Getting together with Christian friends to talk about God and the Bible (“fellowship”)
- Trying to not sin, and getting better at not sinning
- Getting help from Christian friends for sins that I repeatedly struggled with (“accountability”)
- Listening to or reading Christian teaching, sermons, and books
- Tithing at least 10% of what I made
- Memorizing Bible verses
- Going on missions trips
- Serving in my church in some way (children’s ministry, the sound team, the drama team, the greeting team, etc...)
- Talking to unbelievers about Jesus (“evangelizing”)

This list is not exhaustive, but it’s a general sense of what I felt like it meant to be a Christian. This is how I viewed the Christian life. These are the things I thought a Christian should generally be doing. Some of these things may be unique to the church I grew up in, and some other churches might have things that are unique to them; but the point is that Christians have things we do today in Church, and in life, that we view as “what a Christian should look like.”

In this chapter, we want to look at whether these things are the things that should set a Christian apart from the world. Are these the things the Bible says a Christian should be doing? Are these the things that make a Christian stand apart from an unbeliever?

Are these things different than what the Pharisees were doing?

In general, we get our idea of what it means to be a Christian from the culture around us. Our Christian culture tells us what it means to be a Christian, and as we begin to do those things, we then think, “Okay, now I’m a Christian.”

But, here’s the problem: All throughout the New Testament, the Bible warned us that the Church would be filled with many false believers.

It is the biggest warning in the New Testament.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 13:24-43, 24:10; Acts 20:29-31; Romans 16:17-18; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 11:13-15, 11:26; Galatians 1:6-9, 2:4-5, 4:17-18, 5:9-12; Ephesians 4:15, 5:6-7; Colossians 2:1-4, 2:8-23; 2 Thessalonians 2:2-4, 2:8-12; 1 Timothy 1:3-11, 4:1-7, 6:3-5, 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 2:17-18, 3:1-9, 4:2-4;

These warnings don't just tell us that there will be some people in the Church who are false Christians. No – these warnings tell us that the false Christians will be everywhere. Many will be deceived.

Jesus told us the way is narrow that enters life, and few find that road.<sup>1</sup> And the apostles said that many will be deceived and will go to destruction.<sup>2</sup> They will think they are following the Lord, but they will end up failing to enter. Jesus said many will call him, “Lord, Lord” on judgment day, but he will say to them, “I never knew you.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul warned us that the Church would become full of people who do not obey God.<sup>4</sup> We know he was warning us about the Church, because he concluded by saying, “Avoid these people,” and in 1 Corinthians, he said that when he told Christians to avoid certain people, he was not talking about people in the world – he was not warning about unbelievers – he was talking about those who call themselves brothers and sisters, yet who do those things.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in 2 Timothy 3, when Paul warned that the times would be terrible because people would act a certain way, he was warning that the times would be terrible because people who call themselves Christians would act that way.

He was warning us that the Church would be marked by apostasy. He described Christians as loving themselves, loving money, being disobedient, having an appearance of godliness, but lacking the power of God.

He warned us this was coming.

So, here's the thing:

Is it safe to determine what the Christian life should look like by looking at our Christian culture? What if our culture has already turned from God like Jesus and the apostles all told us it would? What if our Church culture has already become apostate?

Using the Old Testament as our guide, we can easily see that people who commit apostasy typically don't realize they've committed apostasy. As we saw at the beginning of this book, Ancient Israel was described as apostate – yet they still thought they obeyed God. They prayed to God, they had holy meetings, they gave God sacrifices, they sang songs to God, they fasted, and they did many things out of what they thought was devotion to God.

But God said they were apostate.

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Titus 1:10-16; Hebrews 12:15, 13:9; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 2:10-19, 3:16-17; 1 John 2:4, 2:9, 2:18-26, 3:1-10, 4:1-6; 2 John 1:7-11; Jude 1:1-25

<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 2:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:1-5

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

And the New Testament warns us that it will happen again – this time, to the Church.

If we know the Church is going to become apostate at some point in time, then we cannot determine what a Christian life should look like by comparing ourselves to the Christian culture around us. Because what if the apostasy has already happened?

The apostles warned us that people would be deceived. They warned us that people would distort Scripture. They warned us that people would follow false teachers.

What does that mean?

It means they will still read Scripture, they will still listen to Christian teaching, and they will still think they are following and obeying God.

But they won't be. They will be deceived.

Paul warned us that we should not evaluate ourselves by comparing ourselves against those around us. He said, "If anyone thinks he is important when he really is not, he is only deceiving himself. Each person should examine his own actions and not compare himself with others. Then he can be proud for what he himself has done. Each person will carry their own load."<sup>1</sup>

Paul was warning that we shouldn't examine ourselves based on those around us. We should look at ourselves. We should look at our own actions. Do our actions line up with what the Bible teaches? Do our actions line up with what Jesus and the apostles taught?

Paul also said, "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. They use themselves to measure themselves, and they judge themselves by what they themselves are. What fools!"<sup>2</sup>

A few verses later, he said, "It is not those who commend themselves who are approved but those the Lord commends."<sup>3</sup>

Paul was saying that there were people who measured themselves by themselves. They used themselves as the standard, and then said, "Look! I meet the standard!"

That's ridiculous – Paul called them fools.

But we do the same thing in the Church today. We've created a culture of Christianity, then we use that culture as our measuring-stick! When we see that we're living up to the standard of the very culture we created, we pretend that we're approved by God!

This is ridiculous! Only those commended by the Lord are truly approved! We're not approved just because we live up to our own standards!

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 6:3-5

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:12

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:18

We're not approved just because we look like the Christian culture around us!

It doesn't matter if you look like all the Christians around you. Do you look like what Jesus said a Christian should look like?

Here's another example:

In Revelation 3, Jesus wrote a letter to the Church in Sardis. He said, "I know your works. You have a reputation that you are alive, but really you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what you have left which is about to die. I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants. So remember what you have received and heard. Obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you."<sup>1</sup>

The Church in Sardis had a reputation that they were alive. Everyone thought they were alive. Everyone thought they were exactly what God wanted. But they were dead.

Think about it. If you were one of the people in the Church of Sardis, and you looked around at the culture around you, you would have thought everyone was alive. You would have compared yourself to them and concluded that you were alive, too. If you believed that they were alive, and you were one of them, you would have also believed that you were alive!

But Jesus said you're dead.

If you compare yourself to the culture around you, you might not know that you're dead when you're dead.

The modern Church is full of people who compare themselves to those around them. They look at themselves and think they're approved by God because they look just like everyone else around them. The Christian culture around us has the reputation of being alive...but it's dead.

We need to know what the Bible says it means to be a Christian. We need to know what the Bible says it means to be alive.

Look at our list again. Look at what we tend to think the Christian life should look like:

- Going to church on Sunday
- Reading the Bible in the mornings
- Praying
- Singing worship songs on Sunday, or on my own
- Getting together with Christian friends to talk about God and the Bible ("fellowship")

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 3:1-3



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- Trying to not sin, and getting better at not sinning
- Getting help from Christian friends for sins that I repeatedly struggled with (“accountability”)
- Listening to or reading Christian teaching, sermons, and books
- Tithing at least 10% of what I made
- Memorizing Bible verses
- Going on missions trips
- Serving in my church in some way (children’s ministry, the sound team, the drama team, the greeting team, etc...)
- Talking to unbelievers about Jesus (“evangelizing”)

There’s something remarkable about this list. There’s something about the things on this list that most Christians don’t seem to recognize – something that no one notices:

This list is a perfectly accurate description of the life of the Pharisees. They did everything on this list.

Let’s go through the list in detail...

### **Going to Church, Reading the Bible, Praying, and Singing Worship Songs**

We think a Christian should go to church on Sundays, read the Bible, pray, and sing worship songs.

This isn’t really any different than the Pharisees. The Pharisees met together every Sabbath day at their Synagogues. They got together to read the Bible, teach from the Bible, and sing songs to God. They did the exact same thing we do.

The Pharisees went to “church on Sunday” in a manner of speaking. It’s important to remember: Judaism was not something God saw as evil. God established Judaism through Moses. When the Pharisees gathered and read the Bible, they were meeting together as God’s people. They would read the Law of God, the same Scriptures we have, and worship the same God we worship.

As Christians, we believe that we should read the Bible. We talk about having our “quiet times” or our “devotions” or whatever other names Christians give it – we talk about getting up in the morning to read the Bible. Christians talk about reading the Bible as if it gives strength for the day. They read the Bible to “feed” themselves. They read the Bible to get “life” from it.

This is the same thing the Pharisees did. Jesus said to them, “You carefully study the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. They

do in fact tell about me, but you refuse to come to me to have that life.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees carefully studied Scripture. They read Scripture every day. They spent a lot of time reading the Bible. And, they did it because they thought it gave them life. They thought it was food. But, reading the Bible doesn’t give you life. You must come to Jesus to have life, and Scripture explains what it means to come to him. If you’re getting up in the morning and reading the Bible, that doesn’t make you any different than the Pharisees. That doesn’t set you apart from the people Jesus called hypocrites and condemned.

Christians talk about singing worship songs. They talk about praising God. But, again – this is no different than the Pharisees.

The Pharisees sang the Psalms David wrote. They gathered together and sang songs to God. In fact, this was something practiced all throughout the Old Testament – all throughout Israel – even when Israel was completely rebelling against God. They still thought they were following God, and they sang songs to him.

As we saw earlier in this book, when God sent the prophets to Israel, he warned them that he was about to punish them – but the people still thought they were obeying God. They thought they were worshiping God.

God said to them, “The Lord says, ‘I hate and reject your feasts; I cannot stand your religious meetings. If you offer me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I won’t accept them. You bring your best fellowship offerings of fattened cattle, but I will ignore them. Take your noisy songs away from me! I won’t listen to the music of your harps.’”<sup>2</sup>

God warned them that their religious meetings were not what he wanted. Their songs didn’t please him. Their sacrifices weren’t enough. He didn’t care. He didn’t want their sacrifices, he hated their meetings, and he refused to listen to their songs.

So, if we think the Christian life looks like gathering together to have religious meetings – meetings where we pray and sing songs – then nothing we’re doing is different from what the Israelites did just before God destroyed them with Babylon. It’s no different than what the Pharisees did every Sabbath. God hated what they did. He explained why he hated it – but for now, we need to understand that, in and of itself, this is not what the Christian life is supposed to look like.

It’s not wrong to come to God and pray or sing songs, but in and of itself, this is not what it means to obey God.

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<sup>1</sup> John 5:39-40

<sup>2</sup> Amos 5:21-23

## **“Fellowship”**

Many Christians think being a Christian means we should talk about God and talk about the Bible. They call this “fellowship” (which is not what *fellowship* means in the Bible – we’ll look at this in more detail later).

The Pharisees also talked about God! The Pharisees talked about the Bible! Jesus often rebuked the Scribes and the Pharisees (the Scribes were the teachers of the Law). They were the ones who taught Scripture to everyone else. They prided themselves on the fact that they knew about God better than anyone else. The Scribes and Pharisees always spoke about God. They always spoke about the Bible. It was what they were known for! It was their reputation! Everyone thought they loved God because they kept God at the center of their conversations!

Talking about God and talking about the Bible does not make you a Christian. Again, in and of itself, it is not obedience to God.

## **Listening to Teaching**

Most Christians think we should listen to sermons or other forms of teaching – whether it be on Sunday or in our own free time. Christians download sermons or watch them on YouTube. They buy countless Christian books. They read Christian blogs.

Again, this is no different than the Pharisees.

The Pharisees always listened to teaching. They gathered and taught the Scriptures and listened to the teaching of the rabbis. They also had countless books they would read and many rabbis they would follow.

What we do today is no different than what the Pharisees did. We’ve already discussed this in detail.

## **Tithing**

Christians think it’s important to tithe. Christians believe it’s important to tithe ten percent of all our income.

But Jesus said about the Pharisees, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You pay tithe on everything you have – even your mint, dill, and cumin. But you ignore the really important teachings of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These are the things you should do, without neglecting those other things. Blind guides! You are like a person who picks a fly out of a drink and then swallows a camel!”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees paid tithe far more diligently than we do! They paid tithe on everything they had! They grew herbs and tithed on those herbs! Christians today just tithe on their income. Think about it: how often do you tithe ten

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:23-24

percent of the tomatoes you grow in your garden? The Pharisees would have tithed on those, too. If anything, Christians today don't tithe as well as the Pharisees did. So, tithing doesn't set us apart.

### Memorizing Scripture

Many Christians believe they should memorize Scripture. But, once again, this is no different than the Pharisees. The Pharisees knew Scripture far better than Christians do today. They could quote entire books of the Bible from memory.

In fact, when Jesus was in the wilderness, Satan quoted Scripture!<sup>1</sup> Satan himself has Bible verses memorized!

Memorizing the Bible does not make us Christians!

Look at our list again!

- ~~Going to church on Sunday~~
- ~~Reading the Bible in the mornings~~
- ~~Praying~~
- ~~Singing worship songs on Sunday, or on my own~~
- ~~Getting together with Christian friends to talk about God and the Bible (“fellowship”)~~
- Trying to not sin, and getting better at not sinning
- Getting help from Christian friends for sins that I repeatedly struggled with (“accountability”)
- ~~Listening to or reading Christian teaching, sermons, and books~~
- ~~Tithing at least 10% of what I made~~
- ~~Memorizing Bible verses~~
- Going on missions trips
- Serving in my church in some way (children's ministry, the sound team, the drama team, the greeting team, etc...)
- Talking to unbelievers about Jesus (“evangelizing”)

So far, none of these things set us apart from the Pharisees or Ancient Israel in the Old Testament. Some of these things don't even set us apart from Satan himself! Yet these are the things we think it means to be a Christian?

Let's keep going...

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13

## **Evangelism and Missions Trips**

Christians go on missions trips to evangelize or help others evangelize. We gather a group of people together and travel to distant places to preach to the lost and make new converts. Many Christians do this in their youth, and honestly, it often ends up just being a social get-together.

Christians think going on missions trips is what a Christian should do.

But the Pharisees did that, too! They traveled in order to reach people. They evangelized. They tried to make new converts. Jesus said to them, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees! You are hypocrites! You travel across land and sea to make one convert. When you find that person, you make him more fit for hell than you are.”<sup>1</sup>

The Pharisees traveled across land and sea to make new converts. But when they did make a convert, they didn’t lead that person into life – they made that convert more fit for hell than they were! They made that convert into another Pharisee!

Going on missions trips and evangelizing doesn’t make Christians any different than anyone in any other religion. People go on missions trips! People evangelize! I’ve had Muslims evangelize to me! People travel and preach on behalf of their religion. This is not something that separates Christians. The Pharisees did the same thing.

Just because you preach to the lost doesn’t mean those converts are going to go to heaven! They will only gain life if you preach what Scripture actually teaches! But Christians usually are only preaching what the Church taught them. Christians think they’re preaching the truth, because they’re preaching what the Church told them. But we were warned that the Church would fall away! How do you know that what you’re preaching is even biblical? How do you know that you’re not just like the Pharisees? How do you know that you’re not making a convert twice as fit for hell as you are? Do you realize that the Bible says you can preach in Jesus’ name, but still lead people to destruction?<sup>2</sup>

Evangelism, in and of itself, is not what makes us Christian. Does that mean we shouldn’t do it? No. But it doesn’t make us Christian. And it does more harm than good if what we’re preaching isn’t the truth. If we are preaching a false gospel or unbiblical lies, we’re not serving Jesus – we’re serving Satan.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 23:15

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 24:4-5; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Corinthians 11:1-4, 11:13-15; Galatians 1:6-9; Ephesians 4:14; Colossians 2:4-8; 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:16-18, 3:1-9, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3:15-17; 1 John 2:4, 2:9; Jude 3-19

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-14; Matthew 12:30; 2 John 9-11

On a related note, some Christians believe we are supposed to heal the sick, cast out demons, and perform signs and wonders. They believe the Christian life should be defined by preaching the truth and performing miracles.

Should Christians preach the truth? Absolutely!

Should Christians be able to heal the sick, cast out demons, and perform miracles? Absolutely!

Is this what it means to obey Jesus? No.

Jesus said, “Not all those who say to me ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On that day many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness.’”<sup>1</sup>

Not everyone who calls Jesus “Lord” will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do what God wants will enter heaven. On judgment day, there will be many people who will think that they will enter the kingdom of heaven because they prophesied, cast out demons, and performed signs and wonders. But Jesus will tell them to leave.

The obvious implication is that healing the sick, casting out demons, and performing signs and wonders is still not, in and of itself, what it means to do what God wants. If you preach and heal and cast out demons, but don’t do what God wants, you still won’t be allowed to enter. Something is still missing. God wants us doing something else.

What is it?

### **Serving in Church**

Christians often think we should be “serving” in the local church. For example, people will serve in children’s ministry, or the sound team, or the greeting team, or in the parking crew, or many other similar ways. I used to be on the drama team at my old church.

But, here’s the reality: When we do these things, all we’re really doing is helping a religious meeting function properly. We’re providing the means for the meeting to run smoothly. We need someone to watch the kids, so we have children’s ministry. We need someone to teach the kids, so we get a drama team to teach through various skits. We need the pastor to be heard, so we have a sound team. We have many people coming in the door, and we want them to feel welcome, so we create a greeting team.

These are all just functions of a religious meeting. These same things

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:21-23

happen in other religions, too. And, the Pharisees did the same things. They gathered together weekly, and they had people who were responsible for making sure those meetings functioned correctly.

What they did was no different than what Christians do today. Serving in the local church meeting is no different than what the Pharisees did in their synagogues to make sure the meeting functioned properly. It doesn't set us apart.

### **Trying to Not Sin and Accountability**

Many Christians talk about *trying to not sin*. They know they shouldn't sin, they try to not sin, and they get help from others with their sin. They call it "accountability."

Yes – Christians shouldn't sin. That's taught very clearly throughout the New Testament. In fact, the New Testament emphasizes the fact that we shouldn't sin much stronger than I've ever heard at any Protestant Church:

"The works of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity, taking part in sexual sins, idolatry, doing witchcraft, hating, making trouble, being jealous, rage, being selfish, making people angry with each other, causing divisions among people, feeling envy, being drunk, having wild and wasteful parties, and doing other things like these. I warn you now as I warned you before: *Those who do these things will not inherit the Kingdom of God.*"<sup>1</sup>

"But there must be no hint of sexual sin among you, or any kind of impurity or greed. Those things are not right for God's holy people. Also, there must be no evil talk among you, and you must not speak foolishly or tell evil jokes. These things are out of character. Instead, you should be giving thanks to God. For you can be sure of this: *No one will have an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God who sins sexually, or does evil things, or is greedy.* Anyone who is greedy is serving a false god."<sup>2</sup>

"Everyone who wants to belong to the Lord must turn away from wickedness."<sup>3</sup>

These are just a few examples. The New Testament doesn't just teach that Christians should, in general, try to not sin. No – it is much stronger than that. Paul wrote to Christians, warning them that no one who does these things will inherit the kingdom of God. He was warning them that these sins must come to an end – not just decrease.

Hebrews warns that if someone deliberately continues sinning, they will face a terrifying judgment.<sup>4</sup> And John wrote, "Anyone who continues to

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:19-21, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5:3-5, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 2:19

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:26-31

sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has been sinning since the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the devil's work. All who are God's children do not continue sinning, because God's seed abides in them. They are not able to go on sinning, because they have become children of God."<sup>1</sup>

Repeatedly, Scripture teaches that if you continue sinning, you will not enter the kingdom of God. So, already, Scripture holds a higher standard than what is preached in most Protestant churches. The Protestant Church teaches that, in general, you shouldn't sin, but if you do sin, you need to remember that you have forgiveness.

Martin Luther, the founder of the Protestant Church, went so far as to encourage Christians to sin in order to prove that they really believe they're forgiven. He not only said, "it's okay if you happen to sin," but he told Christians to sin on purpose to prove their faith. He took his own false gospel to its logical end: if you can be saved entirely independent from works, then it doesn't matter if you obey God or not – you should feel free to sin. Many Christians would argue that the Protestant Gospel does not support this belief – but Martin Luther himself understood it does. He encouraged Christians to sin on purpose. He encouraged them to have so much faith in their forgiveness that they willingly sin to prove how much they believe.<sup>2</sup>

That's not what Scripture teaches. Scripture teaches that you must turn from sin – you must repent.

However, there are also those in the Church who teach people to turn from sin. They teach that Christians should no longer do the sinful things Paul mentioned. They teach that true Christians won't continue living in sin. But they still miss the point. They don't teach true repentance.

Repentance is not just "stop sinning."

No – the Pharisees prided themselves on the fact that they didn't commit adultery, they didn't commit immorality, they didn't break God's Law. They were very good at not doing the things God said not to do. They were proud of the fact that they were really good at not breaking those laws.

Repentance is not just about *not* doing the things God said *not* to do. That is what many Christians miss today. Some Christians teach that true Christians don't continue living in sin – but if they leave it at that, they're not teaching the whole message of repentance!

If you completely stop sinning – you completely stop doing the things God said not to do – but you don't start doing the things God said you should be doing, then you haven't repented. (In fact, you probably just don't

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Martin Luther, Letter to Jerome Weller, July 1530



## DEAD CHURCH

understand how you *are* still doing the things God said not to do. You don't understand what it means when it says, "don't love yourself," or, "don't love money." You think you don't love money because you use the world's standards – not God's standards. You think you don't love yourself because you use the world's standards – not God's standards.)

If you stop doing one thing, but you never start doing something else, then you haven't repented – and you're still no different than the Pharisees. The Pharisees tried hard to not sin – but they weren't doing what God wanted them to be doing. They never repented.

Here's our list again:

- ~~Going to church on Sunday~~
- ~~Reading the Bible in the mornings~~
- ~~Praying~~
- ~~Singing worship songs on Sunday, or on my own~~
- ~~Getting together with Christian friends to talk about God and the Bible ("fellowship")~~
- ~~Trying to not sin, and getting better at not sinning~~
- ~~Getting help from Christian friends for sins that I repeatedly struggled with ("accountability")~~
- ~~Listening to or reading Christian teaching, sermons, and books~~
- ~~Tithing at least 10% of what I made~~
- ~~Memorizing Bible verses~~
- ~~Going on missions trips~~
- ~~Serving in my church in some way (children's ministry, the sound team, the drama team, the greeting team, etc...)~~
- ~~Talking to unbelievers about Jesus ("evangelizing")~~

These are the things Christians think should separate us from unbelievers. Yet, none of these things separate us from the Pharisees or Ancient Israel in the Old Testament. There is nothing about what we think the Christian life should look like that is any different than the people judged guilty by God!

Christians think, "Well, we believe in Jesus!"

But the Bible doesn't teach that you're saved by *believing* in Jesus. The Bible teaches that you're saved by fidelity. You're saved by both believing and obeying! You're saved by loyalty and reliability.

We can't look at our lives and think that we can live exactly like the Pharisees as long as we believe in Jesus. The Bible teaches that we must change the way we're living – our lives must look different. We don't just stop doing

the bad things, we must start doing what God wants us to be doing. We must obey.

So, we need to understand what we should be doing. We need to know what God wants our lives to look like. We can see that what we typically think the Christian life should look like is no different than the Pharisees or Ancient Israel. God judged them guilty because they didn't obey his commands. If our lives look identical to theirs, he will say the same thing about us!

Our Church culture tells us that this is what it means to be a Christian. Our Church culture tells us that this is what the Christian life should look like. But the Bible warns us that the Church culture is going to become apostate. The Bible warns us that Christians will be deceived. The Bible warns us not to compare ourselves to those around us. So, if we define what it means to be a Christian by our Church culture, we will end up being one of the people the Bible warns us about. We will be deceived. We will be led into destruction.

Our Church culture travels across land and sea to make one convert. But they make that convert twice as fit for hell as they are. You don't want to be that convert. You don't want to become twice as fit for hell because you followed the traditions of men, teachings of men, and human rules.

The Church has become a bunch of Pharisees. The Church follows human traditions and ignores the commands of God.

The Pharisees believed they were serving God. They believed they were God's people. They thought God was their Father. They remembered all that God had done for Israel. Just like them, the Church has fallen away. They still think they're God's people. They still call God their Father. They remember everything God did in the first century when the apostles were still alive. But the Church today is no closer to God than the Pharisees were.

The Christian life has become defined by church meetings, prayer meetings and Bible studies. They're not obeying the commands of God. In fact, they're taught in the Protestant Church that they don't *need* to obey the commands of God – that they're saved by faith alone, without works!

The modern definition of what it means to be a Christian is wrong. This means that everyone living beneath that definition is not really a Christian – even though they think they are. The warning of the apostles has proven to be true! People are deceived! People think they're Christians when they're not! People think they know God when they don't! The Church has done exactly what the Pharisees did! The Church has done exactly what was foretold by Jesus and the apostles!

Christians must stop defending the apostate Church – the false Church. They must stop treating it like the holy Temple of God when it's not.

Only those who obey Jesus are saved.

Only those who obey the commands of God are saved.

Jesus said, “Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and hit that house. But it did not collapse, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and hit that house, and it collapsed with a big crash.”<sup>1</sup>

We mentioned this parable earlier in this book. The thing to keep remembering is that Jesus did not distinguish between what we think of as “Christians” and “Unbelievers.” No – Jesus was distinguishing between two people who both had his commands. They both read his words, they both heard his message. The only difference between them was whether they obeyed his commands or not. The wise man was not the man who had the Bible, read the Bible, went to church on Sundays and listened to sermons. The wise man was the man who obeyed what he read, and the foolish man was the man who did not obey what he read.

John said, “We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if someone obeys his word, then in that person God’s love has truly reached its goal. This is how we can be sure we are in him: Whoever says that he abides in him must live as Jesus lived.”<sup>2</sup>

“The world and its desires are passing away, but the person who does what God wants lives forever.”<sup>3</sup>

“And God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”<sup>4</sup>

“The people who obey God’s commands abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>5</sup>

“Loving God means obeying his commands. And God’s commands are not too burdensome for us.”<sup>6</sup>

John was clear: Obedience to God is what distinguishes those who know him from those who don’t know him. We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Those who abide in God are the ones who obey his commands. Those who have eternal life are those who do what God wants.

As Christians, we know that we’ve been adopted by God and can call

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:24-27

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:3-6

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:17

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:22

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:24

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 5:3

him, “Father.”<sup>1</sup> That means we’re in his family. We are brothers and sisters with Jesus himself. We are co-heirs with Christ.<sup>2</sup>

But Jesus didn’t say, “Everyone who believes in me is my brother or my sister.”

No, he said, “My mother and my brothers and sisters are those who listen to God’s teaching and obey it!”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus’ family are those who hear God’s teaching and obey it. Only those who obey God are adopted by God. Only those who obey his commands can call him, “Father.” This is the consistent message in Scripture. This is what Jesus taught. This is what Paul taught. This is what John taught. This is what James taught.

A Christian is only a true Christian if he or she obeys the commands of God. Anyone who calls Jesus, “Lord,” but doesn’t obey his commands will be turned away on judgment day.<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to an important question:

What are the commands of God?

The Pharisees and Ancient Israel did all the same things Christians do today. Their lives were identical to the modern Christian life. Yet God judged them guilty. He condemned them for rejecting his commands.

Obviously, those things are not the commands of God.

So, what are they?

In the book of 1 John, the apostle John explained what it means to obey the commands of God:

“As for you be sure you abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he himself promised to us – eternal life.”<sup>5</sup>

According to John, if you abide in “the teaching you heard from the beginning,” then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.

John also said, “The people who obey God’s commands abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>6</sup>

So, the logical conclusion is that *obeying God’s commands* means abiding in “the teaching you have heard from the beginning.” If you abide in this “teaching,” you are obeying the commands of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:26-4:7

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 8:14-17; Galatians 3:26-4:7; Ephesians 3:6

<sup>3</sup> Luke 8:21

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:24-25

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:24

Which teaching?

The teaching you have heard from the beginning.

What is that?

John told us:

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>1</sup>

The “teaching you have heard from the beginning” is that we must love one another. That is what it means to obey the commands of God. That is the life God is looking for. That is what the Pharisees failed to do. That is what Ancient Israel failed to do. That is what the true Christian life is all about. Those who love one another abide in the Son and in the Father. They have eternal life. They are the true Christians. This is the message John taught all throughout 1 John.<sup>2</sup>

This shouldn’t come as a surprise. Jesus repeatedly said that all of the Law and the prophets are summed up in love.<sup>3</sup> He was saying that the entire Old Testament is summed up in love – loving God, and loving one another. Paul also said the same thing.<sup>4</sup>

All of the Old Testament is summed up in love. Furthermore, the New Testament is also summed up in love. Paul clarified the purpose of the apostles’ instructions: “*The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand either what they are talking about or what they so confidently assert.*”<sup>5</sup>

Both the Old and New Testaments are summed up in love, which is why John said, “This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.” This is what God wanted from the very beginning. God has always wanted his people to be defined by true love – both in Ancient Israel, as well as in the Church.

This is why Jesus said, “This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you.”<sup>6</sup> And he said again, “This is my command: Love each other.”<sup>7</sup>

Jesus’ command is that we love one another. John said that loving one another is what separates true Christians from false Christians. Paul said the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9-10, 3:10, 3:14-18, 3:23, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-14

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-7 (EXB; italics NLT)

<sup>6</sup> John 15:12

<sup>7</sup> John 15:17

purpose of the apostles' instructions was that Christians would all love one another. So, the thing that is supposed to set us apart is love. Love is what will separate us from the Pharisees, Ancient Israel, and the world.

We must love one another.

Love is what should define the Christian life. Love is what every Christian is called to. It's not enough to just "not sin." True repentance is when you stop sinning, and you start loving.

That was the message of John the Baptist. He explained repentance as, "if you have two shirts, share with the person who does not have one. If you have food, share that also."<sup>1</sup>

The message of the Bible is that we must be faithful to God's Anointed One – Jesus. We must be loyal to him. We must keep fidelity. We must be reliable. Being faithful to him means we obey his commands – and his commands are to love one another.

That is what the true Christian life is all about. This is what will separate those who enter the kingdom of heaven from those who merely call Jesus "Lord," but are turned away.<sup>2</sup>

But there's still a problem.

Remember when one of the Scribes asked Jesus which command is the greatest? Jesus answered that the greatest commands are to love God and love one another<sup>3</sup> – exactly as we've just discussed.

But the conversation didn't end there...

"The man answered, "That was a good answer, Teacher. You were right when you said God is one and there is no other God besides him. One must love God with all his heart, all his mind, and all his strength. And one must love his neighbor as he loves himself. These commands are more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices we offer to God."<sup>4</sup>

Do you see the problem?

When Jesus told the Pharisees that the entire Old Testament is summed up in love, it wasn't new information to them. They already knew it was summed up in love. They read the Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets, and they understood that the point of the whole thing was that we should all love – love God, and love one another.

Most Christians today don't understand how the Old Testament is summed up in love – especially the Law of Moses. It seems harsh. It seems

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23, 25:31-46

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Mark 12:28-31

<sup>4</sup> Mark 12:32-33

strict. It seems like the furthest thing from love. They know Jesus said it is summed up in love, so they trust that it must be true. But most Christians can't see it.

But the Pharisees could see it.

They understood that it was all about love.

The Pharisees understood better than most Christians today.

But they still failed.

They still got it wrong.

Do you see the problem now?

If the Pharisees understood that the Law and the prophets were summed up in love, but they still got it wrong, what chance do Christians have, who don't even understand how the Law and prophets are summed up in love? The Pharisees knew the information, and still got it wrong. Most Christians don't even know the information!

Knowing that love is the point of Scripture doesn't mean you love others. Knowing that God wants you to love others doesn't mean you understand what that even means.

Christians think they know what it means to love. They think they understand what it means when the Bible tells them to love one another. They think they know what love is.

But, just like *faith*, and just like *repentance*, Christians are using the wrong definitions. Just like the Church defines the Christian life by comparing itself to the world around them, they do the same thing with *love*. Most Christians know that Scripture teaches that we should love one another. Most Christians know that the Law and the prophets are summed up in love. Again, this is no different than the Pharisees.

The problem is that Christians accept the world's definition of love.

Christians approach the Bible without allowing Scripture to define its own terms. They read the word *repentance*, and they think it means feeling bad about sin and confessing it. But it actually means you change your lifestyle: You stop doing what you were doing, and you start doing something else. Christians read the word *faith*, and they think they understand what it means because they bring their own definition. But it doesn't mean merely *believing* and *trusting*. It means fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness, and reliability.

The same is true with *love*.

Christians see that the Bible teaches that we should love one another. But they just assume they know what it means to love. They never let the Bible teach them what *love* means. They accept the world's definition of *love*.

If we use the world's definition of *love*, the Bible doesn't make sense. Consider what John said:

“Everyone who loves has become God's child and knows God.

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”<sup>1</sup>

“God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>2</sup>

According to John, it’s not possible to love one another unless you know God. No one can love unless they have become a child of God. If we’re using the world’s definition of love, that doesn’t make any sense! That would mean that people in the world who aren’t even Christians have become children of God – because they love others! They love with the world’s definition of love!

Furthermore, Jesus said, “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as it loves its own.”<sup>3</sup> According to John, everyone who loves has become God’s child. But according to Jesus (in John’s gospel account nonetheless), even the world loves its own.

How can both these statements be true if *love* means the same thing in both verses? John must have been referring to something different. He must have meant that a Christian’s love would be different than the world’s love.

Obviously, the Bible was not referring to the same kind of love any unbeliever could have!

We need to understand God’s definition of *love*.

The Bible defines its terms. It teaches us what true love is. But most Christians go through life, thinking they love others, when they don’t. Just like the Pharisees, they know they’re supposed to love, but they don’t realize that they don’t even know what that means. They don’t love with the kind of love the Bible commands us to have. They don’t love according to God’s definition of *love*. Therefore, they’re not obeying the commands of God, which means they’re not true Christians.

Jesus didn’t only tell us to love one another. He said, “You must love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>4</sup>

We are commanded to love as Jesus loved us. That means we are commanded to love with the same kind of love Jesus demonstrated for us. It is a very different kind of love than the world’s definition of *love*.

So, in our next chapter, we will look at what it means to love one another. What is biblical love?

Christians must stop assuming they know things. They must stop coming to Scripture assuming they already understand some of what it teaches. Our human definition of *love* is nowhere near what God wants. So, when we

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:7-8

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:16

<sup>3</sup> John 15:19

<sup>4</sup> John 13:34



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only love with our human definition of *love*, we're not obeying God. This means we don't abide in God, we're not obeying the teaching that was taught from the beginning, we don't know God, we don't have life, we're not children of God, and we're not saved.

It doesn't matter if you go to Church. It doesn't matter if you read the Bible. It doesn't matter if you listen to sermons. It doesn't matter if you pray. It doesn't matter if you worship. It doesn't matter if you tithe. It doesn't matter if you go on missions trips. It doesn't matter if you try to stop sinning – or even if you've convinced yourself that you have stopped sinning. It doesn't matter if you evangelize. It doesn't matter if you pray for the sick, cast out demons, and perform signs and wonders. If you're not obeying the commands of God, you are not a Christian.

Scripture tells us what the commands of God are. It's not subjective. It's not something we can just make up. Scripture tells us what God wants. It tells us what his commands are. It tells us that we must love one another.

And it tells us what true love is...

# Chapter 9

## Lies Christians Believe About Loving One Another

In the early Church, in the book of Acts, we see a remarkable description of the first Christians. The book of Acts describes them as living a kind of lifestyle that is radically different than anything happening in the Church today.

They shared all their possessions in common with one another. They lived in a tight-knit community where they acted as if they really were a true family – they lived together, they ate together, they shared their possessions with one another, they shared their money with one another. They sold the things they owned and gave the money to anyone in need among them. They ate together every day. They shared their food with those who needed food among them. No one who became a Christian was ever in need again because every single Christian actively made sure all the needs of everyone else around them were completely and fully met. They would sell their land, their fields, and their houses, and give the money from the sale to anyone who needed it.

*“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, and praying together.* The apostles were doing many miracles and signs, and everyone felt great fear for God. All the believers were together and held all things in common. They would sell their land and the things they owned and then divide the money and give it to anyone who needed it. The believers met together in the Temple every day. They ate together in their homes, sharing their food with joyful and simple hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

“The group of believers were united in their hearts and spirit. No one said any of their possessions was their own. In fact, everything was held in common. With great power the apostles gave testimony that the Lord Jesus was truly raised from the dead. And great grace was on all of them. For there were no needy people among them. Because from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and gave it to the apostles. Then the money was distributed to anyone who needed it.”<sup>2</sup>

They lived a radical lifestyle. Not only did they share everything, but they were so devoted to one another – making sure that no brother or sister had any needs – that they sold their own possessions and gave to them. They

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:42-46, (EXB; italics ESV)

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:32-35

chose to help one another rather than build a nice, comfortable life for themselves. They chose to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters rather than accumulating possessions, building wealth, or increasing their own standard of living.

They cared more about the needs of the other believers around them than they did about themselves. They cared more about making sure everyone else had what was needed to survive than they did about having comfort, pleasure, entertainment, luxury, wealth, or possessions. They were all willing to live simple, humble lives to make sure that everyone had what they needed.

Those who were rich among them gave to those who were poor – not just to meet their needs, but to the point where they all lived in total equality with one another. No one had more than they needed, and no one had less than they needed. No one lived in luxury. No one held on to more than the bare necessities for themselves. No one tried to make a better life for themselves.

They didn't care about owning things or having the best stuff. In fact, they didn't consider anything as belonging to themselves in the first place.

Their lives – their daily lives – were defined by radically looking out for one another more than they looked out for themselves. They refused to live a life where they had more and one of their brothers or sisters had less.

It was a sort of “holy communism,” not forced on them by the laws of a nation – but chosen willingly by everyone involved. Everyone chose to live this way. Everyone wanted to live this way.

So, the question Christians need to start asking is: Why?

Why did they sell their own possessions? Why did they share everything in common? Why did they refuse to build a nice life for themselves?

Why did the early Church choose to live this way?

What caused them to start doing this?

Why was it that when they chose to become Christians, they all started living this extraordinary, radical lifestyle, but today Christians don't feel the need to do this?

Where did they get the idea that they should live like this?

Was this lifestyle something essential to true Christianity, or was it just something the early Church chose to do... for no apparent reason?

When Christians today look at this description of the early Church, most Christians think this is something that was just unique to them. They think it was something they did, but not something every Christian is expected to do.

I've heard many Christians say, “that's just the way they did things.” They've said, “it's not something God expects everyone to do. It's not something the Bible teaches us to do.” I've also heard Christians say, “only the

early Church in Jerusalem in Acts did that. None of the other early Churches lived that way.”

So, the question is – is this true? Was this radical lifestyle something the early Church just started doing for some unknown reason? Is this radical lifestyle something we can dismiss as unimportant for us to follow in their example?

Christians today are far too comfortable dismissing the examples set by the people in the Bible. Christians today arrogantly assume they know more than the people in Scripture. Sure – they’d never say it that way. They don’t *think* they know more than those people. But they look at those people, they see their examples, they see that those people lived a completely different lifestyle marked by a radical kind of love for others, and they just dismiss it without giving it any real thought. They assume those people just randomly decided to start living in a radical way all by themselves. They assume there’s no need for us to follow their example.

They’re so dogmatic about their human teaching that tells them becoming a Christian is all about believing in the right information that they don’t even ask the question, “why did they start doing that, and why don’t we do that today?”

They never start to ask themselves, “why?” because they’ve been convinced by men that they’re saved by belief and not obedience. Therefore, they have no motivation whatsoever to start living in a radical way that would cost them all their comfort, their luxury, their possessions, their time, and everything else they’re currently enjoying in life.

They don’t ask, “why?” and they don’t investigate it because it’s not something they want to do, and they’ve been told they don’t need to. So, they just dismiss the fact that every early Christian seemed to think this kind of radical lifestyle was something they were supposed to be doing.

This lifestyle wasn’t something they just randomly started doing. They did it because it was what the apostles taught them to do.

When we look at the Church in Acts, we need to remember – this is the only time in all of history where the Church was led by all of the apostles, in one place, at the same time. These men were taught by Jesus himself. They followed him for years, listening to him, learning from him, and being trained by him. Jesus had instructed them, “go and make disciples of all the nations... Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you...”<sup>1</sup>

So that’s what the apostles did. They taught others what Jesus had taught them. They taught them to obey Jesus. The apostles knew what the true

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:19-20

message of Jesus was. They walked with Jesus himself. They were the most reliable people you could possibly learn the truth from.

When Acts said that the believers in the early Church “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,” we tend to think of it today as if the believers devoted themselves to sit around and listen to the teaching of the apostles. We think of it as, “they devoted themselves to make sure they always *heard* the apostles’ teaching.”

We think of it this way because that’s what we do today. Christians today devote themselves to listening to sermons, reading books, and going to Church on Sunday to hear their pastor preach.

But that’s not what it said, and that’s not what it meant.

It said, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching...”

In the original Greek, the word, *devoted* is the word, προσκαρτερέω (*proskartereō*) It meant, *to be strong or steadfast pertaining to...* It meant you were doing something, and you persevered in it and adhered closely to it.

So, in other words, when Acts said the early believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, it was saying they were *doing* what the apostles were teaching. They were obeying. They steadfastly adhered to the apostles’ teaching. They persevered in it even when it was hard. They closely followed what the apostles taught.

They were not devoted to listening. The early Christians were devoted to *doing* what the apostles taught them to *do*.

So, look at the full picture: We have this description of the early Church – the only time in history when all the men trained directly by Jesus were all in the same place, teaching people what Jesus had taught them. The believers are described as devoting themselves to steadfastly obey what the apostles taught. And then it immediately described what that looked like – they shared all their possessions in common, they sold their belongings and gave to those in need, they shared food together, shared their homes together, there were no needy people among them, and everyone lived simple, humble lives, looking out for the needs of their fellow believers above their own needs and above their own comfort.

Why did they do this?

Because they steadfastly obeyed what the apostles taught – and the apostles taught what Jesus had taught them. Luke said the believers devoted themselves to do what the apostles were teaching, and then he immediately said what they were doing. Clearly, what they were doing had something to do with what the apostles taught them to do.

If it’s what the apostles taught them to do, then it’s something we should be doing, too, if we want to be followers of Jesus.

Yet most Christians today read this description and think, “Meh!

Irrelevant! We're saved by believing. We don't have to do that!"

They don't question it any further. They don't wonder where the early Christians got this idea into their heads that they should live this way. They don't try to figure it out. And they don't consider it extremely important to make sure they're not missing something.

This is arrogance – arrogantly assuming we've got it all figured out and we can confidently continue living a life that none of the early Christians chose to live.

This needs to end.

As we've been discussing throughout this book, the Bible *does* teach us that we need to obey. It's not about merely believing the right information.

John wrote the following warnings:

"If we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth."<sup>1</sup>

"Anyone who says, 'I know God,' but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person."<sup>2</sup>

"Do not love the world or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you... but the person who does what God wants lives forever."<sup>3</sup>

"...all who practice righteousness are God's children."<sup>4</sup>

"Those who do not practice righteousness are not God's children..."<sup>5</sup>

"The people who obey God's commands abide in God, and God abides in them."<sup>6</sup>

"Loving God means obeying his commands."<sup>7</sup>

If someone does not obey God's commands, then they're not really a Christian – even if they believe in Jesus, say they know God, and call Jesus, "Lord!"<sup>8</sup>

As we saw in the last chapter, obeying God's commands is not about going to church, reading the Bible, praying, singing worship songs, going on missions trips, trying not to sin, and all the other things we tend to associate with Christianity today. God's commands are all about loving one another – they're all outward focused. They're all about how we treat others.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 1:6

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:4

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:15,17

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:29

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:10

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:24

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 5:3

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

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Jesus said, “I give you a new command: Love one another. You must love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>1</sup>

He said again, “This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you.”<sup>2</sup>

When John said that anyone who doesn’t obey God’s commands isn’t actually a Christian, this is what he was talking about. It’s the command to love one another: Anyone who does not love the brothers and sisters is not a true Christian.

John said this directly: “Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”<sup>3</sup>

“...those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>4</sup>

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>5</sup>

“We know we have left death and come into life because we love the brothers and sisters. Whoever does not love is still dead.”<sup>6</sup>

“This is what God commands: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded.”<sup>7</sup>

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”<sup>8</sup>

“If people say, ‘I love God,’ but hate their brothers and sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen. And God gave us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.”<sup>9</sup>

So, if we call ourselves Christians, we believe in Jesus, we call Jesus “Lord,” we say we know God, and we say that we love God, but we don’t love the brothers and sisters, then according to John, we’re liars, the truth isn’t in us, we’re not God’s children, we live in darkness, we’re blinded by the darkness, and we don’t know God.

In short, if we don’t live in love, then we’re not actually Christians – even if we think we are.

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:34

<sup>2</sup> John 15:12

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:10-11

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:10

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:14

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 3:23

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

That means it's not just about believing the right information. We are expected to obey. We're expected to love. Being a Christian means we obey the commands of God, and his commands are to love one another.

But there's a problem.

Almost every Christian knows we're supposed to love. Everyone knows Jesus commanded us to love one another. Everyone knows God wants us to live lives marked by love.

However, *love* is one of those words most Christians read in the Bible and just assume they know what it means. Everyone assumes they know what it means to love someone.

*Love* is a word we use all the time. We all know what it means. We all understand it.

Right?

But John also said something that confused me for many years:

“Everyone who loves has become God’s child and knows God.”<sup>1</sup>

“...if we love each other, God abides in us...”<sup>2</sup>

“Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>3</sup>

According to John, if you love others, then you have become God’s child, you know God, you abide in God, and God abides in you.

Here’s why this confused me:

When I grew up in church, I grew up in an almost completely Christian culture. Everyone I knew said they were Christians. All my friends said they were Christians. I went to a Christian school, I went to Church on Sunday, I was surrounded by Christians. I read these verses and thought, “all unbelievers must be really mean, angry, selfish people who don’t care about anyone except themselves.”

Why?

Because the Bible says everyone who loves has become God’s child and knows God. Therefore, unbelievers must not love. I didn’t know any unbelievers, because I lived in a culture of Christians and only ever knew Christians growing up, so I just assumed they must not love anyone.

As I got older, I started to get to know some unbelievers. These people outright said they didn’t believe in God. They outright denied Jesus. Some of them were atheists, and others believed in other religions. They were clearly not Christians in any way, shape, or form.

But something was wrong. Something confused me. Something made me hesitate and question the Bible... They were really nice! They were really

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:7

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:12

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:16



kind! They were really loving! In fact, some of them were more loving than most of the Christians I knew! They were generous. They had happy families. They loved their kids. They loved their friends. They loved me.

How can the Bible say that everyone who loves is God's child and knows God when there are so many people in the world who outright deny Jesus, deny God, and aren't Christians, yet who clearly and deeply love others?

Furthermore, Jesus told us, "All people will know that you are my followers if you love one another."<sup>1</sup>

How can all people know that we're his followers based on our love if unbelievers are loving too? How can we be identified by our love if sometimes unbelievers are more loving than we are? How is it that love will ever be enough to distinguish who belongs to God and who does not if unbelievers are also fully capable of loving?

How is that possible?

Is the Bible wrong?

Does this mean Christianity is all a lie?

No. The problem is not the Bible. The problem is that Christians today have accepted the world's definition of what it means to love others. They think it means being nice. They think it means doing kind things. They think it means loving your kids and your family. They think it means having feelings or affection. They think it means being friendly. They think it means getting along with people.

They use the same definition as the world, and therefore they look no different than the world.

If you use the world's definition of *love*, then you will never be able to be identified by your love, because you're only loving others in the same way the world loves others.

The world is full of people who are nice to others, who have deep affection for others, who are kind to others, who give gifts to others, who try to help others, and who truly love others from the depths of their hearts.

But that's not what biblical love is. Sure – all those things are part of what it means to love others, but God's definition of *love* is so much bigger than the world's definition of *love*. God's definition of *love* is what we see in the book of Acts. It's what Jesus did for us.

Remember – Jesus' command was not just "love one another." His command was, "Love one another. You must love one another as I have loved you."<sup>2</sup>

He said again, "This is my command: Love each other as I have loved

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:35

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34

you.”<sup>1</sup>

We were not just commanded to love. We were commanded to love one another *as Jesus loved us*. We are supposed to love with the same radical love that Jesus showed for us where he laid down his life for us, gave up everything, made himself nothing, disregarded everything that was good for himself, and chose to do what was best for us even though it cost him everything.

This is the kind of love we see in the early Church in the book of Acts. Biblical love is when you sell your possessions and give to your brothers and sisters in need so that there are no people in need whatsoever within the body of Christ. Biblical love is when you prioritize the needs of others above yourself, and you willingly choose to stop accumulating wealth and possessions because you care more about meeting the needs of others rather than having a comfortable life for yourself. Biblical love is when you always help when you see a need. Biblical love is when you open your home for strangers to come live with you. Biblical love is when, instead of increasing your own standard of living, you spend all your excess on meeting the needs of others. Biblical love is when you actually lower your own standard of living down to the bare minimum so that you have more you're able to give.

This is what Jesus did for us, and this is what the apostles taught.

In 1 John, the apostle John told us that the only ones who are truly Christians are those who obey God's commands. He told us that God's commands are to love one another, and he told us that everyone who loves has become God's child. But he didn't just leave it at that.

He defined true love. He told us what real love is:

“This is how we know what real love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. So we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Suppose someone has the world's possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but does not help. Then God's love is not living in that person. My children, we should love people not only with words and talk, but by showing true love through our actions.”<sup>2</sup>

Real love is not just *being nice*. Real love is when you lay down your life for others.

Jesus laid down his life for us. If we're supposed to love one another with that same kind of love, then that means real love is when we lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters.

Having the world's possessions simply means you own some things: You have some stuff, whatever it may be, and however much it may be. John said that if you have the world's possessions and you see a brother or sister in

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:12

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:16-18

need, but you don't help, then God's love is not in you.

If God's love is not in you, then you're not a Christian.

If God's love is not in you, then you're not saved.

Real love isn't only expressed through words. It isn't only expressed through talk. Real love is expressed through action. If you really love a brother or sister, you will not allow them to remain in need. You will drop everything for them. You will give up your own possessions for them. You will share everything with them. You won't hold back. Jesus didn't hold back for you, so you won't hold back for them.

John also said, "This is how God showed his love to us: He sent his one and only Son into the world so that we could have life through him. This is what real love is: It is not our love for God; it is God's love for us. He sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way we also should love each other."<sup>1</sup>

John was saying that real love isn't the kind of love we humans naturally express. Real love is what God did. God sent his one and only Son to give us life.

Jesus died. Jesus laid down his own life. It cost him everything. He held nothing back.

That's what real love is.

John said if God loved us with that kind of love, then that's the kind of love we should have for one another.

Jesus taught his disciples to love one another with the same kind of love he showed for us. It's a radical love. It's an extraordinary love. It costs everything. It's more than just helping when you see a need, it's lowering yourself and giving up your own comforts and pleasure and all the things you enjoy so you can meet as many needs as possible.

This is what Jesus taught his disciples, and he told them to teach others what he had taught them. That's why, in Acts 2 and 4, it says that the people were devoted to doing what the apostles taught, and then immediately describes them as selling their possessions and giving to those who had need. It describes them as sharing everything in common with each other. It describes them as welcoming each other into their homes and sharing food.

They created this "holy communism" because of real, true, biblical, radical love. They chose a life of sharing everything in common out of biblical love. They chose to sell their own stuff and decrease their own standard of living out of true love. They recognized what Jesus had done for them, and they chose to love one another with the same kind of love.

They were more concerned about the needs of one another than they

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:9-11

were about themselves. They recognized that whether or not someone else has food to survive, water to drink, clothes to wear, and a roof over their heads is far more important than if they themselves had the comfortable things this life offers.

That’s what real love is. That’s what the apostles were teaching from the beginning.

John said, “This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>1</sup>

From the very beginning, this is the message that was taught. The apostles taught people to love one another, and the people devoted themselves to their teaching.

For us to just ignore their example and pretend like what they were doing was just a random thing they did that we don’t need to do today is for us to ignore what the apostles taught from the very beginning. And John said that if we don’t live that kind of life, then God’s love is not in us. If we don’t live the life the apostles taught, we aren’t true Christians – even if we say we’re in the light, claim we know God, call ourselves his children, call Jesus “Lord,” and say that we love God.

God’s love is not the world’s love. If you only love others with the world’s love, then God’s love does not live in you.

God’s love is extraordinary. It is radical. It’s absurd. We are supposed to love one another with his love. Paul said, “When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more regard to others than to yourselves. Do not look out for your own interests, but look out for others’ interests. In your lives you must have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. Christ himself was like God in everything. But he did not think that being equal with God was something to be used for his own benefit. But he gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He became like a slave and was born as a man. And when he was living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God, even to the point of death – death on a cross.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul was saying we should love one another with the same mindset Jesus had. Jesus wasn’t guided by selfishness – or in other words, he didn’t care about what was best for himself, what he wanted, or what he preferred. Jesus chose to make himself humble – he made himself lower than others, he prioritized them, he made himself a servant to others. He didn’t look out for his own interests, or what was good for himself – he looked out for our interests – what was best for us.

Jesus was in the form of God. He was in heaven with God, equal with

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:3-8

God, and like God in every way. But he didn't think that was something he should hold onto. He gave it up. He made himself nothing. He became like a slave. He humbled himself and died.

Why?

Because that was what was best for others.

Paul was not just saying, "look at what Jesus did! Isn't he amazing?"

So many Christians read this passage and say, "Amen!" They treat it like it was just talking about how amazing Jesus is. They write it into worship songs, they use it to praise Jesus for what he did, and they have warm feelings when they read it. But they miss Paul's whole point.

Paul's point was not merely to praise Jesus. His point was not to give us lyrics for our worship songs. His point was not merely to show us how incredible Jesus is. His point was that we are supposed to be doing the same thing Jesus did. We should not make our decisions based on what's best for ourselves. We shouldn't go through life looking out for our own interests, making sure our own needs are met, or making sure we have the standard of living we prefer.

We should follow the example of Jesus. We should lower ourselves and prioritize others. We should give more regard to others than to ourselves – looking out for their needs above our own. We shouldn't see our possessions, our comfort, our money, or anything else we have as something that should be held onto for our own benefit. We should give it up. We should make ourselves nothing. We should make ourselves servants of those around us.

That's what Jesus did for us. That's what he taught his disciples to do. And that's what they taught us.

The early Church devoted themselves to this kind of lifestyle.

The modern Church needs to start taking this seriously.

In this passage, we can see that Paul, as an apostle, taught this lifestyle to the Philippians. So, clearly it wasn't something only the first Church in Jerusalem did (as many Christians claim to excuse themselves from having to live that way). Paul taught others, outside of Jerusalem, to live this way, too.

However, when he wrote to the Corinthians, he was even more direct about it:

"And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace God gave the churches in Macedonia. Although they have been tested by great trials and are very poor, they gave much because of their great joy. I can tell you that they gave as much as they were able and even more than they could afford. No one told them to do it. But they begged and pleaded with us to let them share in this service for God's people..."

"I am not commanding you to give. But I want to see if your love is

true by comparing you with others that really want to help. You know the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor so that by his becoming poor you might become rich...

“Give from what you have. If you want to give, your gift will be accepted. It will be judged by what you have, not by what you do not have. We do not want you to have trials while other people are at ease, but we want everything to be equal. At this time you have plenty and what you have can help others who are in need. Then later, when they have plenty, they can help you when you are in need, and all will be equal. As it is written in the Scriptures, ‘The person who gathered more did not have too much, nor did the person who gathered less have too little.’”<sup>1</sup>

In this section, Paul was collecting a gift to take to the believers who lived in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> The Christians in Jerusalem were severely persecuted, and many of them were poor. Paul was collecting a gift from among the Gentile churches to bring it back to help those people and meet their needs.

Paul told the Corinthians about the people in Macedonia. The Macedonians were extremely poor. But even though they were poor, they wanted to help those in need. He said they gave as much as they could give, and even more than they could afford to give. They weren’t told to, but they were so filled with love for their brothers and sisters that they begged Paul to accept the gift and take it to those in Jerusalem.

Paul told the Corinthians that he wasn’t going to command them to give either. But – he wanted to see if their love was real by comparing the Corinthians to the Macedonians.

Essentially, Paul was saying that the Macedonians proved their love was real: They wanted to give everything they could afford to give and even more. They laid down their lives for the sake of their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. They gave up everything. They didn’t hold back.

That’s real love. God’s love was living in their hearts.

Paul wanted to see if the Corinthians would respond the same way. He wanted to see if their love was real, too.

And again, he used Jesus as the example we’re supposed to follow. He said, “You know the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor so that by his becoming poor you might become rich.”<sup>3</sup>

This is the example of love we are supposed to follow. Jesus didn’t just give us his leftovers. He didn’t just do something nice for us. He didn’t just

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, Romans 15:25-29

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9

have strong feelings of affection.

He was rich. And we were poor.

He had life. And we were dead.

So he gave up everything.

He made himself poor so that we could have his riches. He died so we could have life. His love was not just about *giving*. It was about letting go of what he had *so* he could give. He let go of his place with God. He let go of his position in heaven. He let go of his riches. He didn't hold onto it for himself. He didn't hold back to maintain some standard of living for himself. He emptied himself. He had nothing left over. He held nothing back.

That's real love. That's what we're supposed to do. And that's what Paul was telling the Corinthians.

But then Paul took it even further...

He told the Corinthians, "Give from what you have. If you want to give, your gift will be accepted. It will be judged by what you have, not by what you do not have. We do not want you to have trials while other people are at ease, but we want everything to be equal. At this time you have plenty and what you have can help others who are in need. Then later, when they have plenty, they can help you when you are in need, and all will be equal. As it is written in the Scriptures, "The person who gathered more did not have too much, nor did the person who gathered less have too little."<sup>1</sup>

Paul was telling them their gift would be judged.

He said, "it will be judged by what you have, not by what you do not have." In other words, he was saying, "if you don't own a lot, you're not going to be judged for not giving a lot. But if you have a lot, your gift will be judged in proportion to what you have."

In other words, generosity isn't about how much you give. It's about what you choose to hold onto for yourself. It's the same thing Jesus said about the widow who only gave two small coins. He compared her to all these rich people who gave huge amounts of money. But Jesus said she gave more than all of them because she gave everything she had to live on. The rich people, on the other hand, gave huge amounts, but they also held onto way more than what they actually needed.<sup>2</sup> That's not real generosity.

Real generosity is judged by what you have.

Paul then told the Corinthians that he did not want them to end up in poverty while others had everything they needed. But he wanted equality. At the time he was writing, the Corinthians had more than they needed, and the believers in Jerusalem didn't have enough. So, he wanted the Corinthians to

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:11-15

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

give to them so that the believers in Jerusalem would have everything they needed and there would be equality among the entire Church body. Similarly, if at a later point in time the Jerusalem Church had more than they needed and the Corinthians didn't have enough, they would give to them and there would again be equality.

This is that concept of “holy communism” again. The Church is supposed to have equality. No one should have more than they need, and no one should have less. If you make more than you need for your basic needs to be met, you should be giving to meet the needs of others. Everyone in the Church body should be equal.

Paul backed this up by quoting a verse from Exodus 16.<sup>1</sup> “The person who gathered more did not have too much, nor did the person who gathered less have too little.”

Paul was referring to the story when God provided manna in the wilderness. In that story, God punished those who gathered more food than they actually needed. They tried to get more for themselves than what was needed to meet their needs, so God made the extra food begin to rot and stink. He wanted them to only gather for themselves what was necessary – he didn't want them accumulating more.

Paul was saying this is how God wants it to be in the Church. No one should hold on to more than they need, and no one should have less than they need. Everything is supposed to be equal within the body of Christ.

This is that “holy communism.” This is exactly what the first Church in Jerusalem did.

Luke described the first Church, saying, “They ate together in their homes, sharing their food with joyful and simple hearts.”<sup>2</sup> When he said they had “simple hearts,” he used a word that indicated *simplicity*. He was saying they chose to live a simple, humble life so they could share generously with one another. They didn't keep more for themselves than they needed. They kept their lives simple. They didn't accumulate possessions, they didn't live in big houses, they didn't enjoy luxuries, pleasures, vacations, or fancy clothes. They lived simply.

Luke also said, “There were no needy people among them. Because from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and gave it to the apostles. Then the money was distributed to anyone who needed it.”<sup>3</sup>

The first Church lived simply so they could give. They maximized how

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Exodus 16:18

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:46

<sup>3</sup> Acts 4:34-35



much good they could do by using their resources for others instead of themselves. Like Jesus, they gave up their riches so those who were poor could be made rich – so they could have what they needed. They made sure there were no needy people among them. They made sure everyone’s needs were met by living simply and sharing everything.

Paul was telling the Corinthians to live the same way – not just among themselves, but across the entire world. If some believers in one city are poor and in need, the believers in another city should help them and meet their needs. There should be no needy people whatsoever in the body of Christ! Those who gather more should not hold onto the excess, and as a result, those who gather less should never have too little.

Clearly this lifestyle was not something only the first Church in Jerusalem did. This was something Paul taught the churches he started everywhere he went.

It’s what the apostles taught from the very beginning.

Here are a few other examples of what the apostles taught:

“When I was with you, I never wanted anyone’s money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did *that you should work as I did and help the weak*. I taught you to remember the words Jesus said: *‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*”<sup>1</sup>

“Those leaders who seemed to be important did not change the Good News that I preach... *The only thing they asked us was to remember to help the poor – something I really wanted to do.*”<sup>2</sup>

“When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of faith.”<sup>3</sup>

“Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands. *Then they will have something to share with those who are poor.*”<sup>4</sup>

“*Provide support for widows who are truly widows... But the widow who lives in luxury is really dead while she is alive...* To be on the list of widows, a woman must be at least sixty years old. She must have been faithful to her husband. She must be known for her good works – works such as raising her children, *welcoming strangers*, washing the feet of God’s people, *helping those in distress*, and *giving her life to do all kinds of good deeds.*”<sup>5</sup>

Paul said if someone lives in luxury, they are really dead while alive. In

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:33-35, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 2:6,10, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 6:10

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:28, emphasis added

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 5:3,6,9-10, emphasis added

other words, you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead, if you claim to be a Christian, but you live in luxury. Those who are truly alive will not live in luxury. They will not live for this world. They will not store up treasure on earth. They will not look out for their own interests. Those who are truly alive will live simply – like the Church in Acts – to meet the needs of others and prioritize their interests. Those who are truly alive will help widows, welcome strangers, serve God’s people, help those in distress, and give their entire lives to do all kinds of good deeds.

Anyone who claims to know God without doing these things is really dead while they are alive.

Here are more examples of the apostles’ teaching:

“Command those who are rich with the things of this world not to be proud. Tell them to hope in God, not in their uncertain riches. God richly gives us everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to *be rich in doing good deeds, to be generous and ready to share*. By doing that, they will be storing up a treasure for themselves as a strong foundation for the future. *Then they will be able to take hold of the life that is true life.*”<sup>1</sup>

“Do not neglect to do *good to others, and share with them*, because such sacrifices please God.”<sup>2</sup>

“Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and without fault is this: *caring for orphans and widows in their distress*, and keeping yourself free from the world’s evil influence.”<sup>3</sup>

The Church today needs to return to what we see in Acts 2 and 4. Their lifestyle of radical love was essential to everything else we read about them in the New Testament. Their lifestyle of radical love was what it meant for them to be Christians.

Christians today are too comfortable. They’ve fallen in love with the things of this world. They enjoy their comfort. They enjoy their standard of living. They enjoy their big homes and fancy cars. They enjoy their vacations, holidays, and parties. They enjoy dining out, dressing fashionably, and staying trendy. They enjoy their Netflix subscriptions, their Hulu subscriptions, their Spotify subscriptions, their Amazon Prime subscriptions. They enjoy their entertainment. They enjoy the American dream.

But John said, “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.”<sup>4</sup>

If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 13:16, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> James 1:27, emphasis added

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:15

Why?

Because you cannot hold on to this world and live in God's love at the same time.

God's love requires you to let go of this world. God's love is when you stop enjoying a comfortable life. It's when you stop enjoying a higher standard of living. It's when you stop enjoying all your entertainment and pleasure. It's when you drop everything and give up everything in order to use those resources to help other people survive. It's when you lower your own standard of living so you can do more to help others. It's when you find your enjoyment in giving to others rather than holding onto stuff for yourself. It's when you live simply so you can love with the love of Jesus.

From the very beginning, the apostles taught the Church to live in love. And they defined what *love* means.

Yet today, this love is almost absent from the Church. Almost every church in the world today talks about giving – but they usually aren't talking about giving to those in need. They usually talk about giving to the Church as an organization. They talk about giving to pay for buildings, equipment, instruments, sound systems, and other completely non-essential worldly things. They talk about giving to pay salaries to people who are supposed to be serving free-of-charge.<sup>1</sup>

This "giving" is not the kind of giving the Bible teaches.

Christians today don't live in true community. They don't share all their possessions in common. They don't lower their own standard of living to help as many people as they possibly can. They don't prioritize the things God prioritizes. They don't sell their real estate, their cars, their TV's, their Xboxes, their home decor, or their movies and music. They don't cancel their Netflix subscription, their Hulu subscription, their Spotify subscription, or their Amazon Prime subscription.

If they do sell something or cancel a subscription, it might be so that they can save some money for themselves – but it's rarely ever so they have more they can give to those in need.

Christians today think they're serving God when they do "ministry" such as serving at their church, doing some kind of outreach, helping drug addicts, going to prisons, or participating in a food drive – all of which are great! But then they get home and continue living their comfortable, cushy American lives. They do not love with the kind of love Jesus showed for us. They only love with the same kind of love the world shows through humanitarian work, acts of kindness, and worldly generosity. They do good deeds sometimes, but they do not give up everything and live in total equality

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:9-10; 2 Corinthians 2:17; 1 Timothy 6:5; 1 Peter 5:2

with all the brothers and sisters. They do not live as an alternative society of people where all needs have been completely and totally wiped out.

Christians today think they're living in love when they buy a new car for themselves and give their old, junker car to someone they know in need. Christians today think they're living in love when they give a small, trivial gift to someone to express their affection for that person, meanwhile they ignore the actual needs all around them. Christians today think they're living in love when they give a one-time gift of money to someone in need, but then they return to their giant homes and comfortable lives. Christians today think they're living in love when they give ten percent of their income, but use the other ninety percent to increase their own standard of living far beyond what they actually need.

This is not God's love.

They cannot be distinguished from the world by their love.

They are not devoted to the teaching of the apostles.

Christians today must repent. They must change the way they're living. The descriptions of the Church in Acts 2 and 4 must become accurate descriptions of the true Church today. There should be no needy people among us. Christians should be selling their possessions and giving to the poor. Christians should be welcoming one another into their homes – not just for a meal, but to live there! Christians should be sharing everything in common with one another so that no one considers their own property to belong to themselves. Christians should be living in total equality with one another – and if there are no needs in the local body of believers, then they should be giving to believers in another location so that there is total equality among believers all around the world.

Christians shouldn't be trying to build successful lives for themselves (according to the world's standard). They shouldn't be trying to accumulate wealth for themselves. They shouldn't be pursuing the American dream.

Christians should prove that their love is real. The Church in Acts is our example. The Macedonians are our example. We can see if our love is true by comparing ourselves to those who really wanted to help others.

Our standard is not the world's definition of *love*.

Our standard is God's love.

God's love is when you give up everything. God's love is when you stop thinking about how much you *have* to give, and you start thinking about how much you'll *be able* to give if you simply change your own lifestyle.

God's love is the "holy communism" we see in the book of Acts. It's a love where everyone lives a simple life and no one has any need because every single person is choosing to help others rather than help themselves. God's love is when you are genuinely more concerned about the needs of

others than you are about yourself – either your own needs or your own “wants”.

God’s love is what Jesus did for us – he was rich, he was in the form of God himself, he had the literal definition of “everything.” He had it. He had it all. And he gave it all up. He made himself poor. He let go of his place in heaven. He made himself nothing. He gave up his riches. He gave up his comfort. He gave up his lifestyle.

Why?

Because we were poor. Because we needed help. Because we had nothing.

So, he gave what he had to us – even though it cost him his very life.

We have God’s love living in us when we do the same.

“This is how we can be sure we are in him: Whoever says that he abides in him must walk as he walked.”<sup>1</sup>

“Your faith makes you offer your lives as a sacrifice in serving God.”<sup>2</sup>

“When we are in Christ Jesus, it is not important if we are circumcised or not. The important thing is faith – *the kind of faith that works through love.*”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 2:17

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 5:6, emphasis added

# Chapter 10

## Lies Christians Believe About The Kingdom of God

As we've seen, the radical lifestyle seen in Acts 2 and 4 was taught by the apostles from the very beginning. It is what real love is. It's what it means to obey God. It's what it means to be a Christian.

It's more than just doing nice things, being kind, feeling affection, or trying to be a good person. It's more than just giving what's left over after you look out for yourself.

Real love, as taught by the apostles, is when you sell your possessions, you give to those in need, you live in equality with one another, no one has more than they need and no one has less than they need. Real love is when you stop looking out for yourself, you give up your own comfort, you give up the nice things you have and enjoy, and you use those resources to help others. Real love is when you follow the example set by Jesus.

Real love is when you begin to live in a type of "holy communism." It's what we see in the early Church – everyone shared everything, no one was in any need, no one lived in excess, no one thought of their possessions as their own, and everyone looked out for one another rather than themselves.

Real love is a love where you are genuinely and completely more concerned about what's good for those around you than you are about what's good for yourself. It's a love where you don't do what's best for you, and you don't do what you would prefer – you make all of your decisions entirely around what is best for other brothers and sisters. Your life is consumed with them – not yourself. You make your decisions around them – not yourself. You spend your resources on them – not yourself. You prioritize them – not yourself.

Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>1</sup>

He also said, "He gave himself for us so he might ransom us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds."<sup>2</sup>

And Peter said, "Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree so we

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:14

would stop living for sin and start living for righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus’ death was not just about us going to heaven someday. He died so that we would be changed right now – in this life. He died so that we would no longer live for ourselves right now – in this life. His death and resurrection were about us being set free and changed today.

That means we don’t make our plans based on what’s good for ourselves, we don’t use our resources to improve our own lives, and we don’t waste our time and energy on doing what we would enjoy. We completely stop looking out for our own interests, and we start to look out for the interests of others.

Jesus gave us a command to love one another as he loved us.<sup>2</sup> That means we’re supposed to love one another with the same kind of love that Jesus showed for us. His love was a radical love. It was a costly love. It was a love that gave up everything and held nothing back. It was a love that chose to stop being rich and comfortable, and instead become poor so that those who were poor could become rich and comfortable.

Paul said, “You know the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor so that by his becoming poor you might become rich.”<sup>3</sup>

Jesus set an example for us to follow. He demonstrated what true love is.

But Jesus did more than just set this as an example.

Jesus taught what this love looks like. He taught people how they should live.

Often, Christians read what Jesus taught, and they miss the whole point. They miss what he taught because they read it through the lens of what men have told us that Jesus said. Men have told us that we just need to believe. Men have told us that we don’t need to have action. Men have told us that Jesus taught that all we have to do is have faith – not that we need to obey.

But Jesus didn’t only teach that we must have faith. Jesus taught action. Jesus had a strong emphasis on the fact that we are supposed to be doing what he taught us to do.

He said, “Not all those who say to me ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On the last day many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 13:34, 15:12

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:9

in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness.’ Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house. But it did not collapse, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a stupid man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house, and it collapsed with a big crash.”<sup>1</sup>

“My true brother and sister and mother are those who do what my Father in heaven wants.”<sup>2</sup>

“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ but do not do what I say?”<sup>3</sup>

“...blessed are those who hear the teaching of God and obey it.”<sup>4</sup>

“Those who believe in the Son have eternal life, but those who do not obey the Son will never have life. God’s wrath stays on them.”<sup>5</sup>

“If you love me, you will obey my commands.”<sup>6</sup>

“Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me...”<sup>7</sup>

“If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”<sup>8</sup>

“...if you obey my commands, you will abide in my love.”<sup>9</sup>

These are just a few examples. Jesus clearly taught that we are required to obey him and do what he taught.

Christians typically read these verses and think, “well yeah – we’re supposed to obey Jesus... And Jesus taught us to believe in him. So, if we believe, then we’re obeying his teaching.”

But, as we’ve seen earlier in this book, the word *believe* and the word *faith* in Ancient Greek meant more than how most Christians think of it today. It meant you believed *and* obeyed. It meant you were loyal, you were faithful, you had fidelity. It meant you were reliable and trustworthy. In fact, the exact same word that is often translated *believe* is also often translated *obey*.

When Jesus said we need to obey him, he was not saying, “you need to obey my commands, and my commands are for you to believe in me.” No – that wouldn’t make any sense because, in Greek, that would be the equivalent

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:21-27

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 12:50

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:46

<sup>4</sup> Luke 11:28

<sup>5</sup> John 3:36

<sup>6</sup> John 14:15

<sup>7</sup> John 14:21

<sup>8</sup> John 14:23

<sup>9</sup> John 15:10



of him saying, “you need to obey me, and my commands are for you to obey me.” In the Greek, it’s the same thing!

When Jesus said we need to obey him, he was talking about something else. He was talking about action. He was talking about lifestyle. Throughout all four gospel accounts, his commands were all practical things he wants us to be doing. Those commands are what we must obey.

As we saw in the last chapter, Jesus told the apostles to teach everyone else to obey what he had taught them. So that’s what they did. They taught others what Jesus had taught them. And what they taught was a radical kind of love. They taught people to stop looking out for their own interests. They taught people to stop accumulating wealth and possessions for themselves. They taught people to share everything in common. They taught people to give to the poor and needy among them. They taught people to live in equality with one another and not hold onto more than what is needed.

The early Church adopted a form of “holy communism.” They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching. They shared everything in common. They sold their possessions and gave to those in need. No one had more than they needed to live, and as a result, no one had less than they needed to live.

There was total equality within the Church. Everyone was more concerned about the needs of others than they were about having the nice things this world offers. Everyone was willing to live at a lesser standard of living so that everyone within the Church would have the basic essentials for life.

They sold their homes. They sold their fields. They sold their possessions. They sold their excess. They took that money and distributed it to those who had needs. They didn’t hold back. They didn’t hesitate.

The apostles taught people these things because that’s what Jesus had taught them. Jesus taught his disciples to live in radical love. Everywhere Jesus went, he instructed those who followed him to live in love – to sell their possessions, share with those in need, and stop accumulating wealth and comfort for themselves. All four gospel accounts are filled with these instructions. Jesus taught people what true love is – and this teaching was an integral part of his mission.

In order to really understand what Jesus taught, it’s important to recognize more of the big picture of what Jesus came to do.

So, let’s take a step back to see the context of Jesus’ ministry...

Jesus came at a time when the Jewish people were anticipating the arrival of God’s Kingdom. They expected the Messiah to come. They anticipated the time when God would set them free from being ruled by

Gentile nations (such as Rome) and would restore the Kingdom of Israel to them forever.

When Jesus came, he announced to the Jewish people, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News!”<sup>1</sup>

The Good News Jesus preached was that the Kingdom was at hand. That phrase, “at hand” meant it was near – it was arriving. The prophets had all prophesied that the day would come when God would restore his Kingdom, it would be ruled by a descendant of David, and it would never be destroyed again.<sup>2</sup> Jesus announced that the time had come – the Kingdom of God, promised by God through the prophets, had finally arrived.

This is the Good News Jesus proclaimed. This is the Good News his disciples preached.<sup>3</sup>

Matthew wrote, “Jesus traveled through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, *proclaiming the Good News about the kingdom...*”<sup>4</sup>

Luke recorded, “Jesus called the Twelve together... He sent them out *to proclaim God’s kingdom* and to heal the sick... So the apostles went out and traveled from town to town, *proclaiming the Good News* and healing people everywhere.”<sup>5</sup>

So, the Good News (or Gospel) that Jesus and the apostles all preached was that God’s Kingdom had arrived. The time had finally come to fulfill what the prophets had promised. God was going to gather his people together again and make them one nation, belonging only to him.

John recorded that Caiaphas, the high priest, prophesied about Jesus without even realizing it. Caiaphas had said, “it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed.”<sup>6</sup> And John explained, “Caiaphas did not say this from himself. As high priest that year, he was really prophesying that Jesus would die for their nation and for God’s scattered children to bring them all together and make them one.”<sup>7</sup>

This is exactly what the prophets had foretold. God was going to gather the scattered people of Israel together and make them one. He would

<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Isaiah 31:5-9, 32:1-5, 35:4-10, 42:13-17, 43:1-7, 44:1-8, 49:1-26, 60:1-22, 61:1-11, 62:1-12; Jeremiah 30:8-24; Ezekiel 17:22-24, 20:34-44, 21:25-27, 28:25-26, 36:33-36, 37:1-28; Daniel 2:31-45; Hosea 1:10-11, 2:14-23, 3:4-5, 6:11-7:1, 11:10-11, 14:4-9; Amos 9:8-15; Micah 4:1-13, 7:11-13; Zephaniah 3:8-20; Zechariah 1:16-17, 2:10-13, 8:3-15, 8:22-23, 9:8-17, 10:3-12

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:17, 4:23, 9:35, 13:18-19, 24:14; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43, 8:1, 9:2, 9:6, 16:16; Acts 8:12, 19:8, 20:25, 28:31

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 9:35, emphasis added

<sup>5</sup> Luke 9:1-2,6, emphasis added

<sup>6</sup> John 11:50

<sup>7</sup> John 11:51-52

re-establish his Kingdom.

In the Old Testament, the Kingdom of God was the Kingdom of Israel. It was a nation that belonged only to God. It was a nation of people God had chosen for himself.

Jesus was saying the time had come for God to re-establish his nation for himself. He was re-establishing the nation of Israel, and Jesus would be the King, which is why he was often referred to as “the King of the Jews” and “the King of Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

But Jesus clarified that things would be slightly different than they had been before. Though he was re-establishing the kingdom of God, it wouldn’t be quite the same as it had been before Babylon.

He said, “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If it belonged to this world, my servants would have fought to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But my kingdom is from another place.”<sup>2</sup>

Unlike the original nation of Israel, which was a real, physical kingdom, Jesus established a kingdom that doesn’t belong to this world. It is a kingdom from another place – outside of this world.

He also said, “God’s kingdom is coming, but not in a way that you will be able to see with your eyes. People will not say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or, ‘There it is!’ because God’s kingdom is within you.”<sup>3</sup>

The Jews expected the physical nation of Israel to be recreated. They anticipated a physical nation in this world. They expected a physical king to rule from the earthly Jerusalem.

But Jesus came with a different kind of kingdom. It isn’t seen with the eyes, and it doesn’t belong to this world. It is a spiritual kingdom, ruled by Jesus, who is seated at the right hand of God in heaven. Its capital city is not the earthly Jerusalem – it’s the heavenly Jerusalem – the city planned and built by God.<sup>4</sup>

So here’s what we must realize:

The Kingdom of God existed in the Old Testament. It was the nation of Israel. They were God’s people, and they had God’s Law. They were different than all the other nations of the world because they obeyed God’s Law and lived the kind of life that God considers to be right.

After they broke God’s Law and turned away from him, God promised them that he would one day make a new covenant with them and re-establish them as his nation again.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 21:5, 27:29, 27:37, 27:42; Mark 15:2, 15:12, 15:17-18, 15:26; Luke 1:30-33, 19:38, 23:1-3, 23:36-38; John 1:49, 12:13-15, 18:33-37, 19:12-16, 19:19-22

<sup>2</sup> John 18:36

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:20-21

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Hebrews 11:10, 11:15-16, 12:18-28

But this time, instead of giving them written laws they needed to follow, God promised them, “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

God wouldn’t get rid of the Law. He would give the Law to his people in a new way. He would write it on their hearts. He would turn them into people who want to do what God wants – rather than people who merely try to follow all the rules.

This promise was fulfilled through the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> As Paul said, “[Jesus] gave himself for us so he might ransom us from all wickedness and to make us pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>3</sup> Paul also said, “The whole law is summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself...’ So I tell you: Walk by the Spirit. Then you will not do what your flesh wants.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus established a Kingdom of people who have God’s Law written on their hearts. They now *want* to do good deeds. They now *want* to live for him. They no longer live for themselves. They live for him.<sup>5</sup> They walk by the Spirit, living in love, and therefore they live a life that fulfills the entire Law of Moses.

Paul said, “...always owe love to each other, because the person who loves others has fulfilled all the law. For the law says, ‘You must not be guilty of adultery. You must not murder anyone. You must not steal. You must not want to take your neighbor’s things.’ All these commands and all others are really summed up in this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as you love yourself.’ Love never hurts a neighbor, so loving is fulfilling the law.”<sup>6</sup>

Christians today have this misconception that Jesus did away with the Law of Moses. They miss the point of what Paul meant when he said we’re no longer under the Law. Paul wasn’t saying we no longer need to obey God. He was saying we no longer need to force ourselves to obey God by following a huge list of rules. God’s Law is written on our hearts. We follow God by walking with the Spirit. We follow the Law because we naturally want to do what it taught. We are now people who want to obey God and do what is right. We obey the Law by walking with the Spirit – living in love, doing good deeds, and living for Jesus instead of ourselves.

Jesus didn’t do away with the Law. In fact, he said the opposite:

“Don’t think that I have come to do away with the law of Moses or

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:33

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Hebrews 8-10

<sup>3</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:14,16

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>6</sup> Romans 13:8-10

the teaching of the prophets. I have not come to destroy them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away, not even the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass away until everything is accomplished. Whoever ignores one of the least of these commands and teaches other people to do likewise will be considered least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever obeys the commands and teaches other people to obey them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus didn’t do away with the Law. He still fully expects us to obey the Law. But now the Law is written on our hearts. Now we obey the Law by following the Spirit. It’s not about following a list of rules, and it’s not about doing things that we don’t understand.

Shortly after saying this, Jesus also said, “Do to others what you want them to do to you. This sums up the meaning of the law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.”<sup>2</sup>

The Law of Moses and the writings of the prophets all had a *point*. That point is love. The point is that we should do to others what we want them to do to us. That’s the point of all the Law and all that the prophets wrote.

The Pharisees (and many Christians today) would follow some of the rules in the Bible, but they would miss the actual point of what the Bible said. They would turn God’s Law into religion rather than understanding what God actually cares about.

Jesus didn’t come to do away with the Law. He came to write the Law on our hearts. So now, by following the Spirit, we can live a life where we obey the *point* of the Law, and we’re not just blindly obeying rules without any understanding. Furthermore, by writing the Law on our hearts, he makes us into people who naturally want to do what the Law really taught all along.

The Law of God has not changed. The Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets were all summed up in love. And Jesus said his command is also to love one another. Those who live in true biblical love are really obeying all the Law and the prophets.

So, here’s my point:

When we look at what Jesus taught, we need to recognize that he taught the same thing that was taught all throughout the Old Testament. The Kingdom of God has the same Law. Nothing has changed about what our lives should look like.

The Kingdom of God is a kingdom of people who live their lives doing what God wants.

The New Testament Kingdom of God is the fulfillment of what God

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:17-19

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:12

always intended the nation of Israel to be. Jesus and the apostles taught the people to live the kind of life that God always wanted the Israelites to live. They taught the people to become a kingdom of people who walk according to God's Law.

Their instructions were nothing new.

They were re-establishing the Kingdom of God. They were re-establishing the nation of Israel. God's Law didn't change. God hasn't changed how he wants us to live. He still wants us to be a kingdom of people who live in a way that God considers to be right (or, righteous).

What Jesus taught was the same thing Moses and the prophets had all already taught.

Let's look at some examples:

The Law of Moses said:

“But there should be no needy people among you, because the LORD your God will richly bless you in the land he is giving you as your own. He will bless you if you obey the LORD your God completely, but you must be careful to obey all the commands I am giving you today.”<sup>1</sup>

So, in the Law of Moses, God told the people that if they were careful to obey him, they would be a nation with absolutely no needy people among them whatsoever.

That's what God always wanted his kingdom to be. He wanted a kingdom of people who had no needy people. He wanted everyone to be taken care of. He wanted everyone's needs to be met.

In the book of Acts, we read, “The group of believers were united in their hearts and spirit. No one said any of their possessions was their own. In fact, everything was held in common... *There were no needy people among them.* Because from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and gave it to the apostles. Then the money was distributed to anyone who needed it.”<sup>2</sup>

So, Moses said, “there should be no needy people among you...” and then Acts said, “there were no needy people among them.”

There were no needy people in the early Church because the early Church fulfilled the Law of Moses. The Kingdom of God is not supposed to have any needy people. If there are needy people in the Church today (which there are many), then the Church today is not fulfilling the Law of Moses, which means they're not living in true biblical love – because true biblical love

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 15:4-5

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:32-35, emphasis added

fulfills all of the Law and all of the prophets!<sup>1</sup>

God wants a nation without any needs whatsoever. That was always his intention. In the book of Acts, when the Church fully obeyed what Jesus had taught, they were a kingdom of people without any needs whatsoever – exactly like God had always wanted his kingdom to be. Jesus had re-established God’s kingdom – he created a kingdom of people who did what God wants – who always wanted to do good deeds, shared everything they owned, and met the needs of everyone around them.

There were no needy people among them because they all obeyed God. This is exactly what God had said through Moses: “There should be no needy people among you... if you obey the LORD your God completely.”

So, there is a direct connection between what Moses said the Kingdom of God should be, and what the early Church was actively doing.

The Kingdom of God, as established through Moses, was supposed to have no needy people. And the Kingdom of God, as established through Jesus, had no needy people.

Here is another example:

In the Law of Moses, it said, “If you lend money to one of my people who is poor, do not treat him as a creditor would. Take no interest.”<sup>2</sup>

When Ezekiel prophesied, he described a righteous man: “He does not lend money for interest or profit.”<sup>3</sup>

In both the Law and the prophets, God said that he wants his people to be people who don’t try to profit off the poor – they don’t lend to people out of a desire to try to make a profit. He wants people who give to the poor and lend to them because of love – because they *want* to help. He doesn’t want them concerned about whether or not they get anything in return.

That’s what God wanted with Israel, and then, when Jesus came, he said, “If you lend things to people, always hoping to get something back, what praise should you get? Even sinners lend to other sinners expecting to be repaid in full! But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back.”<sup>4</sup>

So, the Law of Moses told people not to charge interest on any loans, the prophets said the same thing, and then Jesus came – not only saying to not charge interest, but also to lend to people without even expecting to be repaid!

Jesus taught the same thing Moses had already taught. He wasn’t doing away with the Law of Moses. He came to write the Law on our hearts. He was

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:12; 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-37; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:13-14; James 2:8; 1 John 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 22:25

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 18:8

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:34-35

re-establishing the Kingdom of Israel as God had always intended it to be.

Furthermore – if you look at what Jesus said, he didn’t merely say, “don’t charge interest.” Jesus taught that we should lend to others without even expecting repayment. That means we should let people borrow from us and not even expect them to return what they borrowed. So, not only are we not getting interest on the loan – we’re not even getting back what we gave the person in the first place!

But even this wasn’t new. Moses had also said this...

“If there are poor among you, in one of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be selfish or greedy toward them. But give freely to them, and freely lend them whatever they need. Beware of evil thoughts. Don’t think, ‘The seventh year is near, the year to cancel what people owe.’ Your eye might be evil toward your needy brother and not give them anything. Then they will call out to the LORD about you, and he will find you guilty of sin. Give freely to the poor person, and do not wish that you didn’t have to give. The LORD your God will bless your work and everything you touch. There will always be poor people in the land, so I command you to give freely to your brothers and to the poor and needy in your land.”<sup>1</sup>

In the Law of Moses, they had a law that said at the end of every seven years all debts would be erased. Moses told the people that if there were any needy people among them, they should lend to them even if that seventh year was near, and even if they knew they wouldn’t get repaid for what they gave them. In other words, “lend to them without expecting to get anything back.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus taught the same thing Moses said. The only difference was that Jesus was saying, “this is how you should *always* think about it! This is what the Law was trying to teach you. You shouldn’t *ever* worry about getting repaid. You should be happy to help whenever you see a need, and you shouldn’t ever be concerned about whether or not someone can or will repay you.”

Moses was saying that if there are any poor among God’s people, then you should give freely to them without holding back and without worrying about whether or not they can repay you. That’s the kind of kingdom God always wanted. It’s the same thing Jesus taught, and it’s the kind of kingdom we see in the book of Acts when the people followed the teaching of the apostles – they shared everything, giving freely, and meeting needs without worrying about themselves or about whether or not someone would repay them.

Another thing to note is that, in this passage, Moses said, “Your eye might be evil toward your needy brother and not give them anything.”

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 15:7-11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:35



Moses was saying that you have “an evil eye” when you care more about your own finances and your own well-being than you do about helping your brother or sister survive.

Jesus said the same thing.

“Don’t store treasures for yourselves here on earth where moths and rust will destroy them and thieves can break in and steal them. But store for yourselves treasures in heaven where they cannot be destroyed by moths or rust and where thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will be where your treasure is. The eye is the lamp for the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. *But if your eyes are evil, your whole body will be full of darkness.* And if the only light you have is really darkness, then you have the worst darkness. No one can serve two masters. The person will hate one master and love the other, or will be devoted to one master and refuse to follow the other. You cannot serve both God and worldly riches. So I tell you, don’t worry about the food or drink you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes. . . . Seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well.”<sup>1</sup>

Many Christians don’t understand this passage because they don’t understand what it means to have “evil eyes.” But Moses told us what it means. You have evil eyes when you see a brother in need, but you choose to not help because you’re more concerned about your own finances or your own well-being than you are about your brother in need. The phrase “evil eye” was an idiom commonly used to refer to jealousy or selfishness – someone looking out for their own interests above the interests of others.

Jesus taught the same thing as Moses. We’re all familiar with these verses where Jesus told us to not store up treasure on earth, that we should only have one master, to not worry about our own needs, and to seek first the kingdom. We’ve heard these verses hundreds of times. But right there in the middle of these verses, Jesus mentioned “evil eyes”. He was saying you shouldn’t be someone who looks out for your own interests above the interests of others. You shouldn’t be selfish. You should help the brothers and sisters in need – just like Moses said.

This means that when Jesus taught these other things we’re all so familiar with – storing treasure in heaven, not loving money, not worrying about our own needs, and seeking first the kingdom – his point was that we should look out for the needs of one another, and not look out for ourselves or do what’s in our own best interest.

In other words, by saying “evil eyes” in the midst of this context, he

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:19-25,33, emphasis added

was saying, “don’t store up treasure on earth – give freely to those who are in need. You cannot serve both God and worldly riches – so, give freely to those who are in need. Give freely to those who are in need without worrying about your own needs – what you will eat, drink or wear. If you seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, God will take care of your own needs.”

Jesus was telling us to have good eyes – not evil eyes. His point was not just “don’t love money.” His point was that we should give freely to the poor – just like Moses told us to – and just like we see throughout the early Church in the rest of the New Testament. That’s what it truly means to “not love money.”

He said that if your eyes are evil, your whole body will be full of darkness – and if the only light you have is really darkness, then you have the worst darkness.

John said the same thing:

“Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

John and Jesus were saying the same thing. You are in the light if you have “good eyes.” Or in other words, you are in the light if you help the brothers and sisters in need with no regard for yourself. But, you are in the darkness if you have “evil eyes.” Or in other words, you are in the darkness if you ignore their needs and take care of your own needs instead.

John taught the same thing as Jesus, and Jesus taught the same thing as Moses.

Jesus taught people to live the way that God wanted his people to live from the very beginning. He taught us to love others and look out for their needs instead of looking out for our own needs. He taught us to live the kind of life that Moses taught the people to live. He taught us the point of the Law and the prophets.

If we miss the point of what they were saying, then we very well may think we’re in the light when we’re really still in the darkness. And Jesus said that’s the worst kind of darkness.

Here are a few more examples of things Moses said:

“When you harvest your crops on your land, do not harvest all the way to the corners of your fields. If grain falls onto the ground, don’t gather it up. Don’t pick all the grapes in your vineyards, and don’t pick up the grapes that

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:9-11

fall to the ground. You must leave those things for poor people and for people traveling through your country. I am the LORD your God.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, Moses was talking about your own land – your own fields. You’ve worked hard in your fields. You own them. Everything growing in them belongs to you. But Moses was saying, “don’t harvest all of it. Don’t pick everything. Purposefully leave some of it behind and allow those who are poor to come onto your property and pick your food from your fields without paying for it.”

Today, most Christians would call that “stealing.” Christians have the mindset that every person should have the right to charge for their labor. They have the mindset that no one should ever come onto their property and take anything that belongs to them. Sure, they don’t mind giving when they feel like it – but they don’t think it is someone else’s right to have what they have.

But that is not God’s perspective. God wants his people giving without holding back. He wants them to allow others to freely take their stuff without hindering them. He wants his people to ensure that everyone else has enough to eat without concern for their own well-being. He wants his people to care more about others than they do themselves. That is what it means to live righteously. That is what it means to do to others what you would want them to do to you. In God’s eyes, everyone should have the right to eat – and if one of his people has more than others, those who have less have the right to meet their needs from that person’s excess. That is part of the Law of God’s Kingdom – and it’s summed up in *love*.

When God promised to re-establish the nation of Israel as a people with the Law written on their hearts, he was promising to recreate the nation as a group of people who would live this way naturally. He was promising to create a nation of people who, as Paul said, always want to do good deeds.<sup>2</sup> He was promising to create a nation in which those who are rich use their riches to do good deeds and generously share with others.<sup>3</sup>

Moses also wrote, “At the end of every third year, everyone should bring one-tenth of that year’s crop and store it in your towns. This is for the Levites so they may eat and be full. (They have no land of their own among you.) It is also for foreigners, orphans, and widows who live in your towns so that all of them may eat and be full. Then the LORD your God will bless you and all the work you do.”<sup>4</sup>

God wanted every single person who lived in his kingdom to bring a portion of what they grew and store it for those who didn’t have their own

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Titus 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 6:17-19

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 14:28-29

means of providing for themselves. The point of this law was love. It was to give to those who needed help. It was to show kindness and compassion.

This is the true purpose of tithing. It's not to pay for church buildings, special equipment, and elaborate events. It's not to pay salaries to people. Tithe was always meant to feed the hungry and provide help for the poor. The point of tithing was to give generously and freely without holding back. The point of tithing was to make it so that there was no one in need within God's Kingdom.

That's what God wants.

He doesn't want fancy church buildings. He doesn't want the best equipment or instruments or conferences. He wants love. He wants the hungry to have food. He wants the thirsty to have water. He wants his people looking out for one another – not trying to build rich comfortable lives for themselves.

The purpose of the tithe was clear: everyone would share with one another, and no one within the kingdom would be in need. There would always be enough for everyone. This is what God taught through Moses, it is what he wanted his kingdom to be, and it is what the Church did in Acts when Jesus re-established God's Kingdom.

Later in Israel's history, God continued to teach his people through David and Solomon:

“The wicked borrow and don't pay back, but *the righteous give freely to others.*”<sup>1</sup>

“It is good to be merciful and generous. Those who are fair in their business will never be defeated. Righteous people will always be remembered. *They give freely to the poor.* Their righteousness will continue forever. They will be given great honor.”<sup>2</sup>

“Whenever you are able, do good to people who need help. If you have what your neighbor asks for, don't say, ‘Come back later. I will give it to you tomorrow.’”<sup>3</sup>

“The wicked want what other evil people have stolen, but *good people want to give what they have to others.*”<sup>4</sup>

“Whoever mistreats the poor insults their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.”<sup>5</sup>

“...righteous people give without holding back.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 37:21, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 112:5-6,9, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 3:27-28

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 12:12, emphasis added

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 14:31

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 21:26

“Righteous people care about justice for the poor, but the wicked are not concerned.”<sup>1</sup>

The righteous give freely to others. They give freely to the poor. They don’t hesitate. They don’t delay. They want to give what they have to others – not hold onto it for themselves. They honor God by being kind to the needy. They give without holding back. They care about justice for the poor.

These are the things God cares about. This is the kind of life God values. This is what God always wanted his kingdom to be.

But the people of Israel refused. They wanted to grow richer. They wanted to increase their own standard of living. They began to look out for themselves. They began to increase their own wealth.

So, God sent the prophets to them:

“Your rulers are rebels... They don’t defend the cause of the orphans or listen to the widows’ needs.”<sup>2</sup>

“What gives you the right to crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the dirt?”<sup>3</sup>

“The vineyard belonging to the LORD of Heaven’s Armies is the nation of Israel; and the people of Judah are the garden that he loves. *He looked for justice*, but there was only injustice. *He hoped for righteousness*, but there were only cries of distress. *Woe to you who add more houses to your houses and more fields to your fields until no space is left.*”<sup>4</sup>

“Woe to those who make unjust laws, and those who write laws that make life hard for people. They withhold justice to the poor, and they deprive my people of their rights.”<sup>5</sup>

“I will tell you the kind of fast I want: Free the people you have put in prison unfairly and undo their chains. Free those to whom you are unfair and stop their hard labor. Share your food with the hungry and bring poor, homeless people into your own homes. When you see someone who has no clothes, give him yours, and don’t refuse to help your own relatives.

“Then your light will shine like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your righteousness will walk before you, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. Then you will call out, and the LORD will answer. You will cry out, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’ If you stop making trouble for others, if you stop speaking wickedness and pointing your finger at others, if you feed those who are hungry and take care of the needs of those who are troubled, then your light will shine in the darkness, and you will be bright like

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 29:7

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 1:23

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 3:15

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 5:7-8, emphasis added

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 10:1-2

sunshine at noon. The LORD will always lead you. He will satisfy your needs in dry lands and give strength to your bones. You will be like a garden that is well-watered, like a spring that never runs dry.”<sup>1</sup>

The people of Israel were fasting to God and praying to him, but he wasn’t listening to them. He didn’t want religion. He wanted love. He wanted a nation that does what is right. He wanted them to be fair to others and help those in need. He wanted them to feed the hungry. He wanted them to meet the needs of orphans and widows and those who needed help. He wanted justice. He wanted righteousness. He wanted them to bring poor, homeless people to come live with them in their own homes. He wanted them to give clothes to those who didn’t have any.

He wanted equality within his kingdom. He wanted the needs of the poor to be met. He didn’t want any of his people to be in need. But his people weren’t doing this. They thought they obeyed God because they sang songs to him, raised their hands, prayed, and had religious meetings. But they didn’t meet the needs of their brothers and sisters. They were apostate.

God sent the prophets to Israel, rebuking them because they weren’t obeying the Law of Moses. They weren’t living in love.

God said to King Jehoiakim, the son of King Josiah, “Does having a lot of cedar make you a great king? Your father was satisfied to have food and drink. He did what was right and fair, so everything went well for him. He helped those who were poor and needy, so everything went well for him. That is what it means to know God,’ says the LORD.”<sup>2</sup>

Having a rich, comfortable life doesn’t make you great. Having a nice home doesn’t make you great. Being a successful businessman doesn’t make you great. Life is not measured by how much one owns.<sup>3</sup>

Josiah was the king of Judah. But he was content to just have the food and drink he needed. He didn’t live in luxury. He didn’t hold onto stuff for himself. He didn’t increase his own standard of living. He didn’t prioritize his own needs. He lived simply. He helped the poor. He met the needs of the needy. He looked out for others above himself. He gave up his own comfort and his own resources and his own excess to meet the needs of those living in God’s Kingdom.

And God said, “That is what it means to know God.”

Or, as John said, “if we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth.”<sup>4</sup> “Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 22:15-16

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Luke 12:15

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 1:6

truth is not in that person.”<sup>1</sup> “If people say, ‘I love God,’ but hate their brothers or sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen. And God gave us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters.”<sup>2</sup>

Nothing has changed. God still wants a kingdom of people who live the way Josiah lived – who give up their own standard of living because they’re more concerned about others than they are themselves.

That’s what it means to know God.

If you don’t live that way, you don’t know God. Even if you say you do. Even if you think you do.

When God sent Ezekiel to prophesy, he compared the city of Jerusalem to the city of Sodom.

Remember Sodom and Gomorrah?

Remember how God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by sending fire from heaven onto the cities and every single person died?<sup>3</sup>

Remember how you were taught in Sunday school that it was because Sodom and Gomorrah were sexually immoral and lived sexually immoral lives?

Yeah... that’s not why God destroyed them.

Ezekiel said, “This was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were proud and had plenty of food and lived in great comfort, but she did not help the poor and needy.”<sup>4</sup>

God completely wiped out those cities because those cities were full of rich people living in great comfort, with plenty of food, but they didn’t use their resources to help the poor and needy. They prioritized their own needs. They took care of themselves. They increased their own standard of living. They chased their equivalent of “the American dream.”

God didn’t destroy Sodom because of sexual sin, idol worship, drunkenness, or any of the things most Christians would expect today. No – those cities were utterly destroyed because they thought they had the right to hold on to what belonged to them even though there were other people who were in need and could have benefitted from those resources.

Peter said, “God also destroyed the evil cities of Sodom and Gomorrah by burning them until they were ashes. He made those cities an example of what will happen to the ungodly.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:4

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Genesis 19:1-29

<sup>4</sup> Ezekiel 16:49

<sup>5</sup> 2 Peter 2:6

God destroyed those cities. He burned them until they were ashes. He did this as an example to us. And, through the prophet Ezekiel, he told us exactly what they did that warranted their destruction.

Do you see how serious this is to God?

Do you fear God enough to second-guess your own lifestyle and make sure that you're living the kind of life that God would approve of?

The entire Old Testament is clear – from the Law of Moses through the teachings of the prophets. We've only gone over a small fraction of the places where this is taught – we haven't even scratched the surface. (See our last chapter for more examples)

When Jesus said that all the Law and all the prophets are summed up in, "love your neighbor as you love yourself," he didn't mean that you can just make up your own idea about what it means to love your neighbor as you love yourself. He didn't intend for you to use your own definition of *love*.

No – the Law and the prophets tell us what it means to love others. The Law and the prophets tell us what real love is.

Real love means helping those who are poor. It means feeding those who are hungry. It means welcoming the homeless into our own homes. It means using our resources to help those who are in need. It means eliminating all needs within God's Kingdom by giving up our own standard of living and our own resources. It means being more concerned about whether or not they have everything they need to survive than we are about our own preferences and our own comfort.

God wants a kingdom of people who do what is right, who live in radical love. He wants people who give up their own possessions and give to those in need. He wants people who care more about those around them than they do themselves. He wants total equality within his kingdom. He wants there to be no needy people within his kingdom. He wants total and absolute love.

When the nation of Israel rebelled against the Law of Moses and refused to repent after hearing the teaching of the prophets, God wiped them out. He told them, "you are not my people, and I am not your God."<sup>1</sup>

If people don't use their resources to help the poor and needy, then they're not God's people. If they hold onto their own resources and prioritize their own standard of living, they prove that God is not their God. As Paul said, "Anyone who is greedy is serving a false god."<sup>2</sup>

The nation of Israel refused to live the way God wanted. They cared more about themselves than they did others. They prioritized their own needs

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<sup>1</sup> Hosea 1:9

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 5:5



above the needs of others. They used their resources to increase their own standard of living. They still worshiped God, prayed to God, fasted to God, sacrificed to God, read Scripture, prophesied, and kept the feasts. But they didn't meet the needs of their brothers and sisters. They prioritized themselves. So, God scattered the nation of Israel across the world. He drove them out of his land. He allowed his own kingdom to fall. They had the reputation that they were alive, but they were dead. And he came against them suddenly – like a thief in the night.

But he gave them a promise: “They were called, ‘You are not my people,’ but later they will be called ‘children of the living God.’”<sup>1</sup>

He promised to regather his scattered children and make them one again. He promised to rebuild his nation. He promised to write the Law on their hearts. He promised that his kingdom would return under a new covenant with David's descendant on the throne forever.

Then he sent his one and only Son.

Jesus didn't teach, “believe in me and you'll be saved!” At least, not in the modern-sense that most Christians think today.

Jesus taught fidelity. He taught loyalty. He taught faithfulness. He taught reliability.

Jesus taught action. He taught the Law of Moses. He taught love.

He taught, “Blessed are those who show mercy to others, for God will show mercy to them.”<sup>2</sup>

“If someone wants to sue you in court and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. If someone forces you to go with him one mile, go with him two miles. If a person asks you for something, give it to him. Don't refuse to give to someone who wants to borrow from you.”<sup>3</sup>

“Those who give one of these little ones so much as a cup of cold water because they are my followers will truly get their reward.”<sup>4</sup>

“And what is the seed that fell among the thorny weeds? That seed is like the person who hears the teaching but lets worries about this life and the deceitfulness of wealth stop that teaching from growing. So the teaching does not produce fruit in that person's life.”<sup>5</sup>

“I tell you the truth, you must change and become like little children. Otherwise, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. The greatest person in the kingdom of heaven is the one who makes himself humble like this little

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<sup>1</sup> Hosea 1:10

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:7

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:40-42

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 10:42

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 13:22

child.”<sup>1</sup>

“If you want to be complete, then go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me... I tell you the truth, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

“Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. Whoever wants to become first among you must be slave of all. In the same way, the Son of Man did not come to be served. He came to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many people.”<sup>3</sup>

“Whoever is your servant is the greatest among you. Whoever makes himself great will be made humble. Whoever makes himself humble will be made great.”<sup>4</sup>

“You pay tithes on everything you have – even your mint, dill, and cumin. But you ignore the really important teachings of the law – justice, mercy, and faithfulness.”<sup>5</sup>

“The Son of Man will come again in his great glory, with all his angels. He will be King and sit on his glorious throne. All the nations of the world will be gathered before him, and he will separate them into two groups as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The Son of Man will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

“Then the King will say to the people on his right, ‘Come, my Father has given you his blessing. Inherit the kingdom God has prepared for you from the creation of the world. Because I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited me into your house. I was naked, and you gave me something to wear. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.’

“Then the righteous people will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you into our house? When did we see you naked and give you something to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and care for you?’

“Then the King will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my brothers and sisters, you also did for me.’

“Then the King will say to those on his left, ‘Go away from me. You are cursed. Go into the eternal fire that was prepared for the devil and his angels. Because I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty,

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 18:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 19:21-23

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 20:26-28

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 23:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 23:23

and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not invite me into your house. I was naked, and you gave me nothing to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you did not care for me.’

“Then those people will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison? When did we see these things and not help you?’

“Then the King will answer, ‘I tell you the truth, anything you refused to do for even the least of my people here, you refused to do for me.’

“These people will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

Look at what Jesus taught.

He taught that if we show mercy to others, God will show mercy to us. He taught that we should give freely, without holding back, to anybody – even if they’re mistreating us. He taught that we would get a reward if we gave so much as a cup of cold water to someone because they were part of God’s Kingdom. He taught that money, wealth, and possessions would choke some people because they would want to have those things more than they would want to do what God says is right.

He taught that we should make ourselves humble – make ourselves less than those around us and serve them and look out for their needs. He taught that we should sell our possessions and give to the poor. He taught that the most important things in the Law are justice, mercy, and faithfulness. He taught that on judgment day, he would separate people based on whether or not they helped the brothers and sisters in need.

Jesus taught love. He taught the same things Moses and the prophets had taught. He taught the fundamental principles of God’s Kingdom. He taught what the early Church did. He taught people to stop living for themselves – to stop prioritizing their own needs, to stop living in excess, to stop loving this world, to give to everyone in need, to help others, to prioritize the needs of others, and to obey the Law of Moses.

All of this is just in Matthew.

In Luke, he said even more:

“But woe to you who are rich, because you have had your easy life. Woe to you who are well-fed now, because you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, because you will mourn and weep.”<sup>2</sup>

“Give to everyone who asks you, and when someone takes something

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:24-25

that is yours, don't ask for it back."<sup>1</sup>

"If anyone wants to follow me, they must set aside their own interests."<sup>2</sup>

"As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, some robbers attacked him. They tore off his clothes, beat him, and left him lying there, almost dead. By chance a priest was going down that road. When he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite came there, and seeing him, he passed by on the other side of the road. Then a Samaritan traveling down the road came to where the hurt man was. When he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. The Samaritan went to him, poured olive oil and wine on his wounds, and bandaged them. Then he put the hurt man on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he cared for him. The next day, the Samaritan brought out two coins, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of this man. If you spend more money on him, I will pay it back to you when I come again."

"Then Jesus said, 'Which one of these three men do you think was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by the robbers?' The expert on the law answered, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Then go and do what he did.'"<sup>3</sup>

"Be careful and guard against all kinds of greed. Life is not measured by how much one owns."<sup>4</sup>

"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make for yourselves moneybags that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy. Your heart will be where your treasure is."<sup>5</sup>

"When you give a lunch or a dinner, don't invite only your friends, your family, your other relatives, and your rich neighbors. At another time they will invite you to eat with them, and you will be repaid. Instead, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they have nothing and cannot pay you back. But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."<sup>6</sup>

"...you must give up everything you have to be my follower."<sup>7</sup>

"Those who try to keep their lives will lose them. But those who give up their lives will save them."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:30

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:23

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:30-37

<sup>4</sup> Luke 12:15

<sup>5</sup> Luke 12:33-34

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:12-14

<sup>7</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>8</sup> Luke 17:33

## DEAD CHURCH

Jesus taught that it will be terrible for you if you're rich and enjoying a relatively easy life where you have everything you need, and you're well-fed, and you're laughing. You've worked hard to make sure you have everything you need – meanwhile others around you are struggling to survive. It will be terrible for you because you didn't obey his commands – you looked out for your own interests instead of the interests of others.

He taught that we should give to every single person who asks. More than that – he taught that if someone takes something that belongs to us, we shouldn't ask for it back.

He taught that in order to follow him, we must set aside our own interests. That means we're no longer people who look out for ourselves. We're no longer people who make our decisions based on what's good for us. We must be people who stop looking out for our own well-being and are more concerned about the needs of others.

He taught that we should show mercy to others and help when we see someone in need. He taught that we shouldn't accumulate wealth and possessions and try to have a higher standard of living. He taught that we should sell our possessions and give to the poor, and that our heart will be where our treasure is.

He taught that we should invite the poor and the needy to our meals and give to them generously – even though they will never be able to repay. He taught that we must give up everything we have in order to be his follower. He taught that the only way to have true life is to give up this life and stop living for this life.

These are the things Jesus taught.

He taught love. He taught radical love.

He taught people to stop living for themselves – not just in overtly sinful ways, but in the way that everyone in the world naturally lives. He taught that we should stop looking out for our own needs. We should give generously and freely without holding back. We should help others with their needs and make our decisions around what's best for them. We should give up everything that belongs to us.

When Jesus prayed to the Father, he prayed for the Church, "I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who believe in me because of their teaching. Father, I ask that they can be one. As you are in me, and I am in you, I ask that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. I have given these people the glory that you gave me so that they can be one, just as you and I are one. I will be in them and you will be in me so that they will be in perfect unity. Then the world will know

that you sent me and that you loved them just as much as you loved me.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus prayed that we would be one – one with him and the Father, and also one with each other. He prayed that we would all be united with one another in the same way that he is united with the Father.

But just a few sentences earlier, he explained what his unity with the Father looks like. He said, “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus wants us to be just as united with one another as he is with the Father. That means sharing everything in common, it means no one considers anything to belong to themselves. Everything owned by one person is owned by everyone, and everything owned by everyone is owned by each person. That is the biblical definition of *unity*. That is what it means for the Church to be united. As Luke said in Acts 4, “The group of believers were united in hearts and spirit. No one said any of their possessions was their own. In fact, everything was held in common.”<sup>3</sup>

They held everything in common because they were united with one another in the same way that Jesus is united with the Father. They understood the unity taught by Jesus, and they understood the outcome of that unity.

Jesus said this kind of unity would cause the world to know that he was sent by God, and it would cause the world to know that God the Father loves us just as much as he loves Jesus. The world won’t learn about God and believe in Jesus through words alone. The world won’t learn about God or believe in Jesus because of evangelism, apologetics, debates, or charismatic preachers. No – ultimately, the world will only know and believe when they see true unity. Or as Jesus also said, “All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus wants his body united. He wants his body just as united with one another as he is with the Father. He wants his body knit together in brotherly love. He wants his body held together as a family. He wants the whole body to grow up and be strong through love.<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is the promised King. He is the descendant of David. He is the King of Israel. The Kingdom of God is here, and Jesus is its King. Jesus taught people to live as God always wanted his people living. He taught people the point of the Law of Moses. He came to establish a nation of people who uphold the Law through fidelity, loyalty, faithfulness and reliability.<sup>6</sup> He

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:20-23

<sup>2</sup> John 17:10 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> Acts 4:32

<sup>4</sup> John 13:35

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Ephesians 4:15-16

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Romans 3:31

established a kingdom of people who follow the Law because they are filled with love and want to use their lives to do good deeds. He created a people who no longer live for themselves, but live for him.

So, when we look at the early Church, we need to recognize why they did what they did.

They sold their possessions and gave to the poor among them.

Why?

Because that's what Jesus directly taught, and that's what God always wanted his people to do.

They made sure there were no needy people whatsoever within the body of Christ. They lived in a "holy communism," where everyone willingly shared everything in common and everyone had their needs met because those who had more gave up their excess and helped those who had less.

Why did they do that?

Because that's what the Kingdom of God is supposed to be. There aren't supposed to be any needy people within his Kingdom. Furthermore, they did that because Jesus taught his disciples so many times to look out for the needs of others and help the poor.

The early Church lived a radical lifestyle. It was extreme. It cost them their comfort, their pleasure, their own personal dreams, their possessions, their money, their time, and their entertainment. It cost them their whole lives.

They took Jesus literally.

They lost their lives so they could find life. They gave up everything so they could have Jesus. They understood that Jesus had come to re-establish the Kingdom of God and create a united Kingdom of people who all willingly gave up their own possessions and their own money in order to meet the needs of everyone else within the Kingdom.

They lived in this radical, extraordinary love for one reason:

That's what real love is.

Jesus demonstrated this love for us in his own actions, and he taught this love through his words. This was the love God taught from the very beginning – not just with Jesus, but from the beginning of time. This is the kind of love God has always wanted. This love is what it means to know and love God.

In the Law of Moses, God created a nation that was supposed to be full of people who actively gave to the poor, met the needs of one another, helped those who needed help, and had no needy people among them whatsoever. They were supposed to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters – their fellow Israelites, all born as children of Abraham. They were supposed to be a society of people where there were no needy people whatsoever because everyone used their own resources to meet the needs of

one another.

He sent the prophets to them when they weren't living this way, telling them to repent.

And then Jesus came, re-establishing the Kingdom of God, creating a kingdom of people who all lived the way God originally intended. He taught the same thing God had always wanted. He taught his people to meet the needs of their brothers and sisters – fellow citizens of God's Kingdom, all born as children of God. He taught them to be a society of people where there were no needy people whatsoever. He taught them to use their own resources to meet the needs of one another.

The apostles then taught this to the early Church, and the early Church lived it out. They sold their possessions to help the poor. They welcomed strangers into their homes. They made sure there were no needy people among them. They lived in total equality with one another.

They lived that way because that's what the Kingdom of God is. That's what God always wanted his people to do. That's what Jesus came to establish.

Anyone who does not live that way is not in God's Kingdom.

All the Law, all of the prophets, and all of the New Testament teach us what real love is. Unless you live in the kind of love God wants, then you're not living in true biblical love.

Many Christians think they're obeying Jesus when they're not. They use their own definition of love, or they don't let love *define* their lives. For example, they give to homeless people, they help drug addicts, or they do some type of ministry for needy people. But then, when they're done, they go home to their comfortable life, their high-paying career, their nice car, and all their other worldly possessions. They go back to pursuing the American dream for themselves. They go back to looking out for their own interests.

That is not what it means to follow Jesus.

Yes, we should help the homeless. Yes, we should help the lost. Yes, we should help the drug addicts and the oppressed of this world. Yes – all those things are things we should do. But – first and foremost, the Kingdom of God is supposed to be a kingdom of people who have no needs whatsoever because everyone in the kingdom is looking out for the needs of everyone else rather than themselves.

The Church is supposed to be one body – one family. The Church is supposed to be completely united. The Church is supposed to be recognized by their radical love – a love that stops living for this world – a love that creates an alternative society of people where no one has any needs.

Christians can't "do ministry" and then return to their old, normal lives. If they're returning to an American lifestyle, then their old life never died with Jesus.



## DEAD CHURCH

The first Church lived with one heart and one mind. They shared everything in common, and no one held on to more than the bare essentials for themselves. No one accumulated wealth. No one accumulated possessions. No one planned for retirement. No one sat around enjoying the entertainment and pleasure of this world. No one tried to have a nicely decorated home.

And no one was in need.

That's what it means to follow Jesus. That's what it means to live in love. That's what it means to know God.

Christianity today has become far too individualistic. It's become completely internal and personal. Christians think of it as this private matter between an individual and God. They have the mindset of, "I become a Christian, I love God, I read my Bible, I believe in God, I sing songs to God, and I pray."

That's not true Christianity.

Biblical Christianity was always about the body as a whole. It was about the community. It was about the Kingdom. It was outward-focused. It was about everyone else. It was about everyone looking out for each other. It was about prioritizing one another. It was about love.

True Christianity is not at all an inner, personal, private matter. True Christianity is about the congregation as a whole – the entire body of Christ. It's about everyone doing what is best for one another. It's about the entire Kingdom. It's where everything about your personal relationship with God is about what's good for others and not what's good for yourself.

The Bible is very clear that the Gospel preached by Jesus and the apostles was that God's Kingdom had arrived – God was re-establishing the nation of Israel, gathering his scattered people from all the nations and making them one. The Kingdom of God, as preached in the New Testament, is the same Kingdom it was in the Old Testament, and it has the same Law. But this time, God wrote his Law on the hearts of his people. This time, he made them into a people who want to do what is right. This time, instead of giving laws and rules for people to follow, he gave his people his Spirit to lead them into true love.

God's Kingdom is all about love. God's Kingdom is a Kingdom of people who live in true, biblical, radical love – just like Moses instructed in the Law, just like David and Solomon taught in Psalms and Proverbs, and just like all the prophets taught throughout their writings.

The early Church lived in that radical "holy communism" because that is what God wants his Kingdom to be. That's what he always wanted his Kingdom to look like. That's what true Israel is. And that's what our King wants his people to do.

True, biblical, radical love is when we follow the example of Jesus:

Jesus had everything. He was rich. He was in the form of God.

But he gave it all up. He made himself nothing. He became a slave.

And he died.

Why?

Because we were in need.

Jesus showed us what true love is. He demonstrated it for us. He commanded us to love one another with that same kind of love.

The Kingdom of God is here. It's a Kingdom of people who live in the radical love of Jesus. Anyone who doesn't live in God's love is not part of God's Kingdom.

“We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands.”<sup>1</sup>

“Those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God's children.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:3

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:10

# Chapter 11

## Lies Christians Believe About Holiness

Throughout this book, we've talked about what it means to change the way we're living and start obeying God out of loyalty and fidelity to him. He wants us to be people who live the way Jesus lived – he loved others with a radical love that led him to leave everything he had behind, make himself nothing and die in order to rescue us. He wants us loving others with that same extreme love.

By its very essence, this is not a love that can just be tacked onto our lives. It's not a kind of love that we can continue living life (making all our decisions and setting all our priorities) the same way everyone else in the world does.

This kind of love will redefine our lives. It will redefine what is most important to us. It will redefine how we make our decisions. It will make us different than everyone else around us.

In Scripture, we are clearly called to live holy lives. *Holy* is a word that most Christians are familiar with. However, as we've seen already throughout this book, we often read words in the Bible and bring our own definitions into Scripture rather than looking for what Scripture is actually telling us that word means. For example, *repentance* doesn't mean feeling sorry and confessing. *Faith* doesn't mean believing. *Love* doesn't mean having affection and being nice.

In the same way, *holiness* is often misunderstood in the Church today. A lot of Christians think of being holy as meaning that we're supposed to not sin. That's certainly part of it – but it's not actually what the word means, and because it's not what the word means, it's only part of what the Bible means when it tells us to live holy lives.

The word *holy* in ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek means *set apart*. It means that there is some kind of distinction that makes something or someone different than everything or everyone else. Essentially, being *holy* means being different.

God is holy because God is so vastly different than anything we can imagine that we can't even begin to wrap our minds around him. He is different than us. He's different than any other god that any other religion worships. He is different than anything else – even the other spiritual beings in heaven. This makes God holy. He is set apart. He is different.

When God established the nation of Israel, he told them that they needed to be holy because he is holy. In other words, he told them that they need to be different than all the other nations because he is different than all the other gods.

“The LORD said to Moses, “Tell all the people of Israel: “I am the LORD your God. You must be holy because I am holy.””<sup>1</sup>

“Be my holy people. Be holy because I am the LORD your God. Remember and obey my laws. I am the LORD, and I have made you holy.”<sup>2</sup>

“So you must be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from other people to be my own.”<sup>3</sup>

“Remember my commands and obey them; I am the LORD. Do not defile my name. You Israelites must remember that I am holy; I am the LORD, who has made you holy. I brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD.”<sup>4</sup>

The Israelites were called God’s holy people because he chose them out of all the other nations to be his own. They were given their own holy land – a land ruled by Yahweh – unlike all the nations of the Gentiles that worshiped and served false gods. Israel was different from these other nations in that they were called to carefully obey God’s commands.

In ancient times, at least during the times that Israel was genuinely obeying God, there was a noticeable difference between the Israelites and the other people of the world. They were holy. They were different. You would’ve been able to see the difference between them and the other people of the nations around them because the way they lived was different.

In fact, we can see how the nations around them noticed that they were different when we look at how the people of those nations talked about the people of Israel. In the book of Esther, Haman (the bad guy) described the people of Israel this way:

“Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain group of people scattered among the other people in all the states of your empire. Their laws are different from those of all the other people, and they do not obey the king’s laws. It is not right for you to allow them to continue living in your kingdom. If it is good to the king, let it be decreed to destroy those people.”<sup>5</sup>

When the people of Israel were obeying God, they were holy. Their laws were different. They were different. They were so different than everyone else that the people in all the rest of the world noticed how different they were.

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 19:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 20:7-8

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 20:26

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 22:31-33

<sup>5</sup> Esther 3:8-9

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The same should be said of the Church.

The Church is also called to be holy. This means the same thing for us – we are called by God to be different than all the other people of the world.

“Therefore dear friends, we have these promises from God, so we should make ourselves pure – free from anything that makes body or soul unclean. We should try to become holy in the way we live, in the fear of God.”<sup>1</sup>

“But be holy in all you do, just as God, the One who called you, is holy. Because it is written in the Scriptures: ‘You must be holy, because I am holy.’”<sup>2</sup>

“You should live holy lives and serve God, as you wait for and look forward to the coming of the day of God.”<sup>3</sup>

Israel was supposed to be holy – different than everyone else – because they were supposed to live the way God wanted them to live. The Church is also supposed to be holy – different than everyone else – because we’re supposed to live the way God wants us to live. It’s more than just “not sinning” – it’s about how we live our lives.

Paul described it this way:

“Therefore brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I urge you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be holy and pleasing to him, which is the true way for you to worship. Do not be conformed to this world; instead be transformed by a new way of thinking.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul taught that we should offer our entire lives as a living sacrifice to God. That means everything about our day-to-day lives should be given to God, and everything about our day-to-day lives should be different than everyone else in the world. Paul taught that this is the true way for us to worship. True worship is not about singing songs and raising your hands. True worship is about how you live your life.

In ancient Israel, those who feared God understood that true worship of God was not about the sacrifices, the worship songs, or the prayers. They understood that true worship of God was about living life the way he wants – and therefore being different than everyone else.

This was consistently the message of the prophets.<sup>5</sup> God didn’t want their sacrifices, he didn’t want their songs, and he didn’t want their prayers. He wanted their lives to be different. He wanted them to live for him. When they

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 7:11

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 1:15-16

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 3:11-12

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Hosea 6:6, 8:13; Amos 5:21-24; Psalm 40:6-8; Isaiah 1:11-20, 58:3-11; Proverbs 21:3; 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Micah 6:6-8

didn't live their lives correctly, he told them he wouldn't even listen to their music or songs. They could raise their hands and sing songs all day, but if their lives were wrong, it wasn't worship and God wasn't listening.

Paul said the same thing: our true worship is how we live our day-to-day lives. Our true worship is when we live lives that make us different than everyone else because we give everything to God.

Furthermore, Paul said that we shouldn't look like this world. When he said, "do not be conformed to this world," it could be translated, "do not be pressed into a mold by this world."

Here's what that means:

I have a friend who knows a lot about making plastic molds. He is a really good artist and he has, at times, made plastic molds for a living. A few years ago, I noticed a magnet on his refrigerator. It looked exactly like a real chocolate-chip cookie. It was extraordinary. It was so lifelike. If he had set it in a pile of real cookies, it would have blended right in, and I would have tried to eat it. Everything about it was super-realistic. I asked him how he made it.

I'm going to really botch the explanation here, but he essentially poured some kind of plastic resin over a real chocolate-chip cookie, he let it dry, then he pulled the real cookie out of the plastic. This left him with a perfect plastic mold of that cookie. Then he poured some more plastic into that mold and let it dry. When he separated the new plastic from the mold, he had an exact duplicate of the original chocolate-chip cookie. It perfectly reproduced every crack, every pore, and every bump. Then he painted it, stuck a magnet inside it, and placed it on his fridge.

When Paul told us to not be conformed to this world, he was telling us to not let the world be a mold that shapes how our lives look. If the world is a mold of a cookie, we need to make sure that we're not the plastic being poured into the mold. We need to make sure that we don't let the world make us look exactly like that cookie.

Paul was not just saying, "Make sure you go to church, read your Bible, and don't do bad things." Paul was saying, "Everything about your lives needs to be different – not just different from who you used to be, but different than everyone else in the world. You can't live your day-to-day lives the same way that everyone else in the world does. You can't make your decisions the same way. You cannot let your life – your plans, your decisions, your priorities, your lifestyle – be shaped by the world around you. You cannot just adopt their way of life. You must be different."

We should look different than unbelievers in our day-to-day lives. There should be such a stark contrast between us and the unbelievers around us that everyone knows we are different simply by the way we live. After all, Jesus said, "All people will know that you are my disciples if you love each

other.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said our love should be a kind of love that makes us different than everyone else in the world. It should make us stand out. This is also what Jesus meant when he told us to let our light shine before men:

“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its salty taste, it cannot be made salty again. It is good for nothing, except to be thrown out and walked on. You are the light that gives light to the world. A city that is built on a hill cannot be hidden. And people don’t light a lamp and then hide it under a bowl. They put it on a lampstand so the light shines for all the people in the house. In the same way let your light shine for people to see, so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven.”<sup>2</sup>

Our lives should be so different than the world around us that we are a light shining out into the world – giving light to everyone.

This is what it means for us to be holy. This is what it means to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.”<sup>3</sup> It means we give him our whole lives. We shine for him. We represent him. We look like him, and not like this world. We’re different because he is different.

Unfortunately, in the Church today, a lot of Christians don’t understand what it means to be different than the world. A lot of Christians don’t understand just how much God wants us to stand out – how much he wants us to shine. Few Christians would recognize that they don’t understand what this means, but their lifestyle, their decisions, their priorities, and their goals show that the kingdom of God is not what is most important to them.

Jesus said, “Be concerned above all else with God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well.”<sup>4</sup>

This verse is usually translated, “Seek first the kingdom of God...” but I chose this translation because we’re all familiar with the phrase “seek first the kingdom of God.” We know the Bible tells us to seek first the kingdom, and most Christians would say that they *do* seek first the kingdom.

But most Christians today don’t even know what that means.

Seeking first the kingdom of God means we are concerned about God’s kingdom before anything and everything else. It is our top priority. And if it’s our top priority, then it’s how we make our decisions – it shapes the way we live our daily lives.

Think of it this way:

If you work a standard Monday to Friday, 9-5 job, and I call you up and ask if you want to go the movies at noon on Wednesday, you’ll probably

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:35

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 5:13-16

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37-38

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 6:33

say no. You have to work. Why? Because work is your priority. Does it mean you don't want to go to the movies? No, not necessarily. But you prioritize work because it's what's most important to you. It pays your bills, it gives you food, and it keeps a roof over your head. You know that if you prioritize something else over work, you might lose your job, and that's a bigger priority to you than almost anything else. Therefore, it dictates how you make your decisions.

The Kingdom of God should be our top priority. It's not just that we like the Kingdom of God, we think about it, we look forward to Heaven, and we sing songs to Jesus. No – seeking first the Kingdom means it comes before anything and everything else. It should be how we make our decisions. Nothing comes before it.

In the same way that you prioritize your job over hanging out with your friends, you should also prioritize the Kingdom of God over everything else. You don't make decisions or plans that will interfere with what you should be doing for the Kingdom.

If, when you make plans, you plan to do other things first, and the Kingdom isn't your top priority, then it shows that the Kingdom is not what you are seeking first.

Here's another way of thinking about it:

Tess and I live in a tiny house. We found a school bus on eBay, we converted it into a tiny house over the course of about seven months, and we live in it full-time. Ever since moving into our tiny house, I've met countless people who also want to one day live in a tiny house. Usually they're young. Usually they don't have or make much money. Usually they're not already in a place where they can afford to build their own tiny house. When I talk to these people, I can usually tell fairly quickly whether they actually want to live in a tiny house or if it's just a thing they dream about. I can tell what they really want, not by what they say, but by how they live.

If someone tells me they want to live in a tiny house someday, but they don't have the means of doing it right then, I'll often ask them about how they are living day-to-day. If they're still going to the movies, eating out at restaurants, buying nice clothes, going shopping for fun, buying music or movies or tv shows or video games, buying a nice car, or any other things like these, I can tell that they don't really want to live in a tiny house. They might think they do, but they don't.

Why? How can I know?

Because if someone really wants to do something, they'll change how they're living now in order to get that thing later. And if someone can't afford to build or buy a tiny house now, but they're spending their money on other things, it shows that those other things are their priority. They care more about



having the comforts and pleasures of movies, restaurants, and music than they do about one day living in a tiny house. Therefore, yes, they might dream about living in a tiny house, but what they actually want is to go out to a nice restaurant tonight and then to go to the movies. What they actually want is to relax and listen to music right now. And because they're choosing to have a certain lifestyle right now, they'll never be able to afford to build or buy a tiny house – at least not any time soon. The decisions someone makes about how they spend their time and money show what they truly care about and prioritize.

The Kingdom of God is the same way.

If we say we want the Kingdom of God, we say we want to live for God, we say we want to please God, but we show by our lifestyle and our decisions that we have higher priorities, then we show by our lifestyle that we don't really want the Kingdom of God, we don't really want to live for God, and we don't really care about pleasing God.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God is something you give up everything to get:

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so excited that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field. Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.”<sup>1</sup>

The man in Jesus' parable shows that he really wants the Kingdom of God because he prioritized it – he went and sold everything he had to get it. It came first.

So many Christians think they want the Kingdom of God because they *say* they do, and they even *think* they do. But they show by their decisions that they have higher priorities. They show by their lifestyle that they want something else more than they want God. In other words, they honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him.<sup>2</sup> They do things for God, but they don't make God everything. They don't offer their entire lives to him. Even though they say they love God, and they think they love God, their lives show that they've been conformed to this world. They're not different. They're not holy.

Becoming a Christian means we start to live for God. We seek first the Kingdom. Seeking first the Kingdom of God means exactly what it says – it comes first! It comes before anyone and anything else. It is the highest priority. That means you make your plans around it. Your decisions are centered on it.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:7-9

You don't make your decisions and plan your life the way the rest of the world does. The Kingdom of God is what you value. It's what you prioritize. It is everything.

This is consistently the message of the New Testament:

"You don't care about the things of God, but only about things people think are important... If people want to follow me, they must give up the things they want. They must take up their cross and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will give up true life. But those who give up their lives for me and for the Good News will have true life. It is worthless to have the whole world if they lose their souls."<sup>1</sup>

"Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my follower."<sup>2</sup>

"...you must give up everything you have to be my follower."<sup>3</sup>

"Our only goal is to please God whether we live here or there, because we must all stand before Christ to be judged. Each of us will receive what we should get – good or bad – for the things we did in the earthly body. Therefore since we know what it means to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people."<sup>4</sup>

"If I still wanted to please people, I would not be a slave of Christ."<sup>5</sup>

"To me the only important thing about living is Christ..."<sup>6</sup>

"Your faith makes you offer your lives as a sacrifice in serving God."<sup>7</sup>

"Those things were important to me, but now I think they are worth nothing because of Christ. Not only those things, but I think that all things are worth nothing compared with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him, I have lost all those things, and now I consider them worthless trash. This allows me to have Christ and to be united with him."<sup>8</sup>

These are just a few examples. The New Testament consistently teaches that becoming a Christian means you change everything about your life. God becomes everything to you. His Kingdom becomes the only thing you think about, and the only thing you consider when you make your decisions and your plans.

Many Christians understand this concept. They understand the principles of it. Like the person who says they want to live in a tiny house, they would say they want to seek first the Kingdom, live entirely for the Kingdom, and prioritize the Kingdom in everything they do. But practically, their actions

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 8:33-36

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:27

<sup>3</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:9-11

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 1:10

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 1:21

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:17

<sup>8</sup> Philippians 3:7-9

## DEAD CHURCH

show that they have other higher priorities... and often they don't even seem to realize it.

Throughout the next few chapters, I want to focus on a few practical topics. I can't go through every single topic that comes up in human life. But I want to go through a few examples and show how Christians have gotten their priorities out of line with Scripture. They think they're living for the Kingdom when they're not. Their actions show that the Kingdom is not their highest priority. The principle behind all these topics applies to every aspect of life, whether covered in these chapters or not. That principle is this: The Kingdom of God, and what God wants are what determine your plans, your actions, and everything you do. Period.

# Chapter 12

## Lies Christians Believe About Worldliness

In the last chapter, I mentioned that someone might tell me they want to build a tiny house. But if that person doesn't have the finances for it, and I can see that they're spending their money on other things, I can tell that they don't actually want to live in a tiny house. They might think they want to; they might dream about it; it might seem really cool to them; but if they're not working toward it, they must not really want it... If they're spending their money on movies, restaurants, video games, music, fashion, cars, iPhones, or anything else like that, it shows that those things are their priority. It shows that that person wants those things more than they want a tiny house.

We met someone recently who was really honest about how this concept applied to him. He said that he really wants to have a garden and grow all his own food. But, when he gets home from work in the evenings, he often finds himself sitting on the couch and drinking a beer. If he just chose to go plant a garden one time instead of drinking a beer, he would already have that garden by now! And he admitted it. He said, "I guess that means what I really want is to sit around and drink a beer. I guess I don't really want a garden."

The Kingdom of God is the tiny house. The Kingdom of God is the garden.

Our actions speak louder than our words.

So many Christians think they care about the Kingdom of God... but their daily lives show that they're not working toward the Kingdom. Their lifestyle shows that they want other things more than they want God.

Christians say they want the Kingdom of God, but they spend their money and time at the movies. They say they believe God wants us to feed the hungry, but they spend their money eating out at restaurants – feeding themselves at five to ten times the cost it would take to eat at home – instead of using that money to feed other people, like God wants. They say they "delight in the Lord," but they spend their time and money on games, sports, hobbies, and other entertainment. They say they want to seek first the Kingdom, but they watch TV for hours every day.

The list goes on and on...

Why do Christians spend so much money on music? Why do they think it's so important to be fashionable and stylish? Why do they buy cars that

are more fun than they are practical? For that matter, why do they spend tens of thousands of dollars to get a car when they could get one just as practical for a fraction of the price? Why do they seem to always need the newest iPhone or Android? Why do they need the best technology and the newest Xbox? Why do they spend so much time trying to have fun and pleasure? Why do they think it's okay to build giant fancy homes or buy the best houses in the best neighborhoods? Why do they pour so much money into decorating their homes and making their houses look nice? Why do they spend so much money on vacations?

In short, if Christians really want the Kingdom of God so much, why are they spending all their time, money, and energy to enjoy the things of the world?

They say with their lips that they want the Kingdom of God. But their actions prove that they want this world.

We're all familiar with the verse that says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you."<sup>1</sup>

Christians need to pay close attention to the warning John gave us here. Do you take it seriously? If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you. That means you're not saved. That means you're not really a Christian. That means you think you're alive, but you're dead.

We know we're not supposed to love the world. We know we're not supposed to love the things in the world. So, what part of not loving the world or the things in the world do Christians not understand? Why do Christians think it's acceptable to pursue the American dream?

Christians do these things because they think they can do these things without loving the world. They don't understand that their *actions* show what they love – not their words. In other words, doing these things is, in and of itself, what it means to love the world.

Just because you say you don't love money doesn't mean you don't love money. Just because you think you don't love money doesn't mean you don't love money. What you *do* with your money shows whether you love it or not. If you spend it on yourself, you love it. If you spend it on yourself, you love yourself. Because as we've talked about in this book – love is not a feeling or a thought. It's an action. Your love is what you do. It's what you prioritize. So, if your money is spent on yourself, then you love money and you love yourself.

That's how God defines it.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:15

This is why the early Church was described as living simply.<sup>1</sup> They didn't accumulate possessions, they didn't try to be fashionable, they didn't spend money on vacations, they didn't have huge homes... they didn't live in excess! They used their excess to meet the needs of others. More than that – they simplified their own lives so they would have more to give to others! If they had lived any other way, they would have proven that they loved money more than the brothers and sisters, and they would have proven that they loved themselves more than the brothers and sisters. In fact, that's why Ananias and Saphira died.<sup>2</sup> They loved money, they loved themselves, and they thought they could lie to God about it.

This is also why, when Paul described the apostasy of the Church, he said, "...people will love themselves, love money... they will not love others... they will love pleasure instead of God."<sup>3</sup>

Christians don't seem to recognize that this is an exact description of the Church today. Remember, Paul was describing a Church that is deceived. The New Testament is full of warnings that people will be deceived. That means they won't know they love themselves. They won't know they love money. They won't know they don't love others. And they won't know they love pleasure instead of God.

Why? Because they changed the meanings of all those words! They think they don't love themselves because they think it's all about a feeling, or about being a "narcissist." They think they don't love money because they're not rich (often just because they're spending it!), and they think loving money means being rich and always trying to have more. They think they do love others because they love them with the same kind of love the world has for others. And they think they don't love pleasure instead of God, because they think they can love both pleasure and God.

But James said the opposite:

"You want things so you can use them for your own pleasures. You adulterers! Don't you know that loving the world is the same as hating God? Anyone who wants to be a friend of the world becomes God's enemy. Do you think the Scripture means nothing that says, 'The Spirit that God made to live in us wants us for himself alone'? ... So give yourselves completely to God... You who are trying to follow God and the world at the same time, make your thinking pure."<sup>4</sup>

James didn't say that being consciously enamored and infatuated with the world is the same as hating God. But that's what most Christians seem to

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:46

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 5:1-11

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-4

<sup>4</sup> James 4:3-5,7,8

think it means to love the world. He didn't say that you have to be aware of the fact that you love the world in order for it to be adultery. He didn't say that you have to consciously hate God in order to hate God and be his enemy.

What James said is: if you want things for your own pleasure, you're an adulterer, you love the world, you hate God, and you're God's enemy.

Wanting pleasure is adultery. That's a serious warning. James wasn't just using a flamboyant word to get your attention. *Adultery* is a biblical word. It's the same word God used to describe Israel at the height of their apostasy.<sup>1</sup> It's the same word God used to describe Israel when he told them, "You are not my people, and I am not your God."<sup>2</sup>

James knew what he was saying. He was very careful with his words. He was saying, "If you want things for your own pleasure, you're apostate."

Paul described apostasy, and James described adultery, and they both said the same thing: If the Church is filled with people who spend their time, money, and energy on themselves, it's apostate. If they fill their lives with pleasure and comfort instead of building their lives around the Kingdom of God, they're adulterers. If the Church is full of people who refuse to live simply and think it's okay to pursue a higher standard of living for themselves, they're not God's people.

But this is the description of the Church today.

Christians have made loving the world acceptable. They think they can serve God and love the world at the same time because they've come up with their own ideas about what it means to serve God, and they've come up with their own ideas about what it means to love the world. They've made up their own standards, and then measured themselves by those standards.<sup>3</sup>

James didn't mince his words. He wanted Christians to feel really uncomfortable if they're saying they love God, but they're spending their time and money doing the opposite of what he said. If a Christian says they love God – if they go to church, read their Bible, sing worship songs, pray, go on missions trips, tithe regularly, talk about God, evangelize, and even feel really deep affection for God – but, they spend their free time watching TV, watching movies, listening to music, reading novels, watching sports, they spend their money on things for themselves, going to out to eat, getting a nice car, getting a nice house, decorating their home, getting the newest phones and computers, going on vacations, wearing the best clothes, or anything else that the world offers – if they say they love God but they're doing those things, then they don't actually love God. They love themselves. They love pleasure.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 3:8-10, 5:7-9, 9:2, 13:25-27

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 1:9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 10:12

They love this world. They love money. They're adulterers. They hate God. They're his enemies.

Loving the world is the same as hating God. It makes you his enemy.

Jesus said the same thing: "No servant can serve two masters. The servant will hate one master and love the other, or will be devoted to one master and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and worldly riches."<sup>1</sup>

It's not just "you can't love both." He was saying, "if you love one, you hate the other." If you love worldly riches, you hate God. And if you truly love God, you will hate worldly riches. That's what James was saying.

After James gave this warning about hating God, he continued, explaining that God wants you for himself alone. He doesn't want to share you. He is a jealous God. So, give yourself to him completely. That means you aren't divided – you have fidelity; you have loyalty. Your entire life and all your actions show that the Kingdom of God is the only thing you care about.

If you say you want a tiny house, but you spend your time, money, and energy doing other things, you prove you *don't* want a tiny house. And if you say you love God and want his Kingdom, but you spend your time, money, and energy doing other things, you prove you do not want his Kingdom. You cannot be divided. Stop trying to follow God and the world at the same time – because you can't.

Loving the world is not about what you think you love, what you feel like you love, or what you say you love. Loving the world is about what you do with your time, money, and energy. John said, "If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you." Why? Because you cannot spend your time, money, and energy on the things of this world and the pleasures of this world, and also spend your time, money, and energy on the things of God. You cannot live in excess and also live simply. You cannot sell your possessions and give to the poor and also spend your money on yourself.

As we've talked about in this book, we are saved by faith, but in Greek the word translated *faith* means fidelity. It means loyalty. It means reliability. It means faithfulness. It means you both believe and you obey at the same time; the word never meant just believing. That's what James was getting at. You must have fidelity to God. If you don't have fidelity, you're God's enemy – you're not saved, because we're saved by fidelity; we're saved by loyalty. If you are not loyal to God and God alone, if you are trying to share yourself with both God and the world, you don't have faith, you don't have fidelity, and you're not saved. You're still God's enemy. And, according to James, you are an adulterer, because you are cheating on God – you say you love God, but you love the world with your actions. That's adultery. According to James, that

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 16:13



means you hate God.

In our English Bibles, when James said, “do not doubt”<sup>1</sup> it actually should be translated “do not waver,” or “do not go back and forth between two things.” People think it means *doubt* because they think *faith* means *believing*, and therefore, *wavering* would mean *doubting*. But in Greek, *faith* doesn’t mean *believing*. So, *wavering* or “going back and forth between two things” isn’t about believing either. It’s about your loyalties.

You can’t waver between God and the world.

You can’t go back and forth between loving God and loving his enemy.

You need to be faithful. You need fidelity. Your priorities need to be on the Kingdom of God, and you need to stop thinking about the things of this life. This is something found repeatedly throughout the New Testament...

When the rich young ruler asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus said, “There is one more thing you need to do. Go and sell everything you have, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me.”<sup>2</sup>

Most Christians are familiar with this story. But if asked if they are supposed to sell their possessions, most Christians would say, “No.” Christians today think Jesus was just making a point. They think he took this as a teaching opportunity to explain to people that you can’t love God and love money (and of course when they say that, they mean, “You can’t love God and also consciously and knowingly love money and be greedy.”)

But that’s not what was happening here. Jesus wasn’t just making a point. The rich young ruler was a real dude. This isn’t a parable. It’s a story about a real guy who came to Jesus, asking him how he could have life. This was a real, historical man who was searching for salvation.

Jesus gave him an answer that turned him away.

Jesus gave him an answer that would turn most modern Christians away.

This wasn’t merely some teaching opportunity. Jesus wasn’t exaggerating to make a point. A lot of Christians seem to think that this wasn’t something Jesus expected all his followers to do. They assume that if Jesus wanted all his followers to live this way, he would have told all his followers to do this... not just the rich young ruler. But... the rich young ruler was *not* the only person who Jesus said this to:

“Jesus said to his followers... ‘Sell your possessions and give to the poor.’”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. James 1:6-8

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:21

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:22,33

So, Jesus didn't just say this to the rich young ruler. He said this to his followers. The rich young ruler wasn't merely an opportunity to make a point; it wasn't something only that one guy was told to do. It was something Jesus was telling everyone to do. It's what he expected his followers to do. It's what he expects us to do. It's what he taught.

It's what John the Baptist taught when he explained what repentance means.<sup>1</sup> It's what we see Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector, doing when he repented.<sup>2</sup> It's what we see the early Church doing in the book of Acts.<sup>3</sup> It's what John was saying when he told us not to love the world or the things in the world.<sup>4</sup> It's what James was saying when he told us that if we want things for our own pleasure, we're adulterers.<sup>5</sup> It's what Paul was saying when he said that the apostate Church will love money, love themselves, and love pleasure.<sup>6</sup>

Jesus also warned us that if we fail to hear and obey this, if we keep our possessions, enjoy the things of this life, and love the pleasures and comforts of this life, then we are incapable of bearing good fruit...

Most Christians are familiar with the parable of the sower. In that parable, the farmer goes out to sow some seed and he throws the seed on a bunch of different kinds of soil; but only one of those locations ever ends up bearing fruit. Jesus said that some of the seed is sown among the weeds, and this is how Jesus later described the seed sown among the weeds:

"The seed that fell among the thorny weeds is like those who hear God's teaching, but they let the worries, riches, and pleasures of this life choke them and they do not produce good fruit."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus was warning us about the worries, riches, and pleasures of this life. Those worries, riches, and pleasures are the weeds. They will choke you and keep you from producing good fruit. In short, are you focused on the things this life offers you to enjoy, or are you focused on what God offers? Is your time and money spent on the pleasures of this life, or is your time and money spent on the Kingdom of God? Did you receive the word and bear fruit? Or did you receive the word, believe the word, go through life thinking you're a Christian, but never bear any fruit at all?

If you're enjoying the riches and pleasures of this life, Jesus would say you're being choked – you're not producing the fruit he wants. John the Baptist and Jesus both said that every tree that fails to produce fruit will be cut down

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Luke 3:11

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Luke 19:1-10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35, 6:1-4

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:15

<sup>5</sup> Ref. James 4:3-10

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:1-5

<sup>7</sup> Luke 8:14

and thrown into the fire.<sup>1</sup>

So, if you're spending your time, money, and energy enjoying the riches and pleasures of this life... Jesus said you're not producing good fruit, John said the love of the Father isn't in you, James said you hate God, you're his enemy and you're an adulterer, Paul said you're apostate, and Jesus – the King and Judge you will have to give an answer to – said you will be thrown into the fire.

You cannot follow him and enjoy the pleasures of this world and this life at the same time. Because Jesus gave us a command: "I give you a new command: Love one another. You must love one another as I have loved you."<sup>2</sup> "This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you."<sup>3</sup>

We are not commanded merely to love. We are commanded to love with the same kind of love Jesus has for us. Jesus gave up everything for us. He was rich, and he gave it all up.<sup>4</sup> He was in the form of God, and he made himself nothing.<sup>5</sup> He is our Lord, but he made himself a slave.<sup>6</sup> He is the author of life, but he gave up his life as our ransom.<sup>7</sup> He did this for us. His love included more than just helping others – it included letting go of pleasure, letting go of possessions, no longer looking out for his own interests, no longer doing whatever he wanted.

So, are Christians really following him when they say we don't have to do the same? Are Christians really following him when they spend their lives on their own pleasure and entertainment? Are Christians really following him when they give themselves all the things they want? As Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>8</sup>

Jesus made himself nothing and died to make us people who no longer live for ourselves. This isn't something we get to pick and choose which aspects of our lives are going to be for the Lord, and which aspects we can still enjoy for ourselves. You're either in or you're out. You're either living for the tiny house, or you're not. You're either living for the garden, or you're not. You're either living for the Kingdom, or you're not.

Jesus wants us to do what he did – he wants us to do everything we can to help others. He wants us to be people who stop looking out for our own interests. That means more than just helping others when we happen to

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 3:8-10, 7:15-21; Luke 3:7-11; John 15:6

<sup>2</sup> John 13:34

<sup>3</sup> John 15:12

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:9

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Philippians 2:4-8

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Philippians 2:7; Luke 22:25-27; John 13:14-17

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Acts 3:15; Matthew 20:26-28; Mark 10:42-45

<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

notice. That means we stop living in comfort and ease, we stop living in luxury, and we stop enjoying all the pleasures of this life so that we can maximize how much good we're able to do!

If we stop spending money on ourselves, we have so much more we can give to others! If we sell the possessions we have, we have the means to immediately help others! Furthermore, if we stop spending money on ourselves, then we can spend less time trying to make money, and more time meeting the needs of others! Our lives are supposed to be entirely about others – about meeting needs and helping people live – not about having fun and a good time!

The first Church was not *only* a group of people who helped one another with their needs. It was a group of people who simplified their lives so they could help as much as possible. They let go of the things of this world, and they prioritized one another. This step is essential for this kind of community to work. If everyone is sharing everything, but one person is refusing to simplify, that person will require more resources than the others. Suddenly, those who have less will be funding the lifestyle of the person who has more. It doesn't work! If someone is refusing to let go of this world, they're proving that they don't love their brothers and sisters – they're refusing to do what they can to meet the needs of others, and they're also forcing their brothers and sisters to fund their extravagance!

“Extravagance” doesn't mean *living in a mansion and driving a sports car*. “Extravagance” could be as simple as *taking a vacation, going out to eat, or going to the movies*. The point is – if one person is living at a higher standard than others, that one person will consume more resources, and all will not be equal. To have equality and also meet as many needs as possible, everyone must simplify. You cannot meet the needs of everyone while everyone is also pursuing the American dream. Or in other words, you cannot love God and love the world. You cannot love God and want things for your own pleasure. Loving God means obeying him<sup>1</sup> – you cannot love him and continue pursuing the American dream.

Until American Christians repent, they will never experience the life we see in Acts. They will never taste true Christianity. American (and Western) Christians must let go of their current standard of living. They must begin to recognize they don't need the things they think they need. They will never be able to meet the needs of all the brothers and sisters until they let go of their current lifestyle. And they will never know God until they begin to love the brothers and sisters with God's radical love.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 5:3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:4, 2:9-11, 2:24-25, 3:4-11, 3:14, 3:16-18, 3:22-24, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-3

As God said to King Jehoiakim, “Your father was satisfied to have food and drink. He did what was right and fair, so everything went well for him. He helped those who were poor and needy, so everything went well for him. That is what it means to know God,” says the LORD.”<sup>1</sup> And as John said, “Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person... Whoever says that he abides in God must live as Jesus lived.”<sup>2</sup>

James gave us another warning many Christians don’t understand:

“People who think they are religious but say things they should not say are just fooling themselves. Their ‘religion’ is worth nothing. Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and without fault is this: caring for orphans and widows who need help, and keeping yourself free from the world’s evil influence.”<sup>3</sup>

Lots of Christians think they’re living for God. They think they’re religious. They think they’re right with God and living in a way that pleases him. But their religion is worth nothing. There is only one kind of life that God accepts. The only kind of religion that is acceptable to God is a lifestyle defined by loving others – caring for orphans who need help, caring for widows who need help, and staying free from the world’s evil influence.

The world is God’s enemy. The world lives in a way that God hates. Jesus often said things like, “You don’t care about the things of God, but only about things people think are important.”<sup>4</sup> He also said, “What is important to people is an abomination in God’s sight.”<sup>5</sup>

Keeping ourselves free from the world’s evil influence is about more than just *not getting drunk* or *not sleeping around* or *not watching bad scenes in movies*. The world’s evil influence is what tells us we need to live the American dream. The world’s evil influence is what tries to get us to waste away our money on possessions and entertainment for ourselves rather than using our resources to help others survive. The world’s evil influence tries to get us to change our priorities in life – to get us to live for this life and this world rather than the Kingdom of God. The world’s evil influence is, quite simply, everything about the world we live in.

We’re supposed to be completely different than the world. That means we should be people who reject everything the world offers – the stuff, the entertainment, the lifestyle, and the worldviews. This goes back to what Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 22:15-16

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:4,6

<sup>3</sup> James 1:26-27

<sup>4</sup> Mark 8:33

<sup>5</sup> Luke 16:15

said – do not be conformed to the world.<sup>1</sup>

We cannot let the world around us shape us. We cannot allow it to press us into a mold. We must stay different. We must keep ourselves free from the world's evil influence.

God hates what the world does. He hates how people live. He hates how the world is full of people who pile up possessions for themselves while others nearby are naked, starving, and homeless. He hates consumerism. He hates the world's entertainment. He hates the world's luxuries and pleasures. He hates how much the world tells people to focus on themselves, spend on themselves, enjoy themselves, and provide for themselves. He hates how the world tells people that if they have more than they need to survive, that means they can enjoy a higher standard of living. He hates how people put their own standard of living as a higher priority than the survival of others.

He told us a day is coming when he will crush this world. The Kingdom of God will crush the kingdoms of this world, and God will establish true justice on the earth.

But Christians don't seem to understand what justice is.

Do you understand that it's unjust in God's eyes for you to have more than you need to survive while someone near you is starving?<sup>2</sup> Do you understand that it's unjust in God's eyes for you to sit back in pleasure while someone near you is dying, and you could help?<sup>3</sup> Do you understand that it's unjust in God's eyes for you to spend time, money, and energy enjoying nice things while others nearby don't have anything at all?<sup>4</sup>

The world tells us these things are acceptable. But Moses told Israel that God hates these things.<sup>5</sup> The prophets told Israel God was going to judge them because they did these things.<sup>6</sup> Jesus told the Pharisees they were hypocrites because they lived this way.<sup>7</sup> And the apostles warned us that the Church would become an apostate adulterous people because they would accept this kind of lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 12:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Psalm 146:7; Proverbs 22:9, 28:27, 29:7; Isaiah 32:6, 58:7-11; 2 Corinthians 8:8-15

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Leviticus 25:35-38; Deuteronomy 15:7-11; Psalm 41:1, 72:12-14, 138:6; Proverbs 3:27-28, 21:13, 24:11-12; Ezekiel 16:49; Luke 10:25-37, 16:19-31; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; James 4:17; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 22:16; Ezekiel 16:49, 18:7-9; Zechariah 7:8-10; Luke 16:19-31; 2 Corinthians 8:8-15; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; James 5:1-5; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Exodus 22:21-27; Leviticus 19:9-10, 19:13, 23:22, 25:35-37; Deuteronomy 10:18-19, 14:28-29, 15:1, 15:7-11, 15:13-15, 24:12-15, 24:17, 24:19-22, 26:12-13, 27:19

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:17, 1:23, 3:15, 5:7-8, 10:1-2, 32:6, 58:1-10; Jeremiah 5:27-29, 7:5-7, 22:3-4; Ezekiel 16:49, 22:7, 22:12, 22:29; Amos 2:6-8, 4:1, 5:10-15, 6:1, 8:4-6; Micah 2:1-2, 6:11-12; Zechariah 7:8-10; Malachi 3:5

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Matthew 23:3-4, 23:14, 23:23, 23:25-28; Mark 12:38-40; Luke 11:39-46, 16:14-15, 20:45-47

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Acts 20:29-35; 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 2:9-12; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-3, 2:10-22; 1 John 3:10; Jude 4, 11-13, 17-19

Look at the Church today to see if the apostles were true prophets: The Church has not kept itself free from the world's evil influence. Christians have adopted the world's definition of justice – they have become corrupted by the world's evil influence. They've accepted an American worldview in place of a Kingdom of God worldview. They're convinced that God cares about the things that Americans value. They're convinced that if God created the laws of a nation, he would create a capitalist society where everyone looks out for their own needs and everyone has the opportunity to “pick themselves up by their own bootstraps” and make a better life for themselves. Therefore, they're convinced that it's okay for them to build a nice life for themselves and to hold on to their possessions.

Often when Christians hear about “sharing everything in common” and “everyone living in equality,” they respond by saying, “Well, that sounds like communism.” There's a problem with this response: it shows that they're getting their values and their beliefs primarily from America rather than the Bible. The Bible doesn't use the words *capitalism* or *communism*. But the Bible does tell us what kind of laws God would write if he was creating the laws of a nation... because he *did* create the laws of a nation!

In Exodus, God said not to mistreat foreigners, widows or orphans. He said not to charge interest on loans, and to return collateral when someone takes out a loan – even before they pay it back.<sup>1</sup> In Leviticus, he said to purposefully leave some of the harvest behind and allow the poor and the foreigners to come into your fields and eat some of your harvest.<sup>2</sup> He also said that every fifty years, all debts should be completely wiped out and all property that was sold should be returned to the previous owner.<sup>3</sup> Later in the chapter, he said that if someone is poor, you should not try to make a profit from that person, but you should help that person and make sure all their needs are met.<sup>4</sup> In Deuteronomy, God said that every person in the nation should bring a tenth of everything they make or grow, and it should be given to the Levites, the foreigners, the orphans, and the widows – so those people are not in need.<sup>5</sup> Also in Deuteronomy, God said to give freely to the poor without worrying about whether or not they would repay.<sup>6</sup>

These are just a few examples. These are the kinds of laws God would write for a nation. The Law of Moses was not just religious law. It was national

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Exodus 22:21-27

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Leviticus 19:9-10 and 23:22

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Leviticus 25:8-17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Leviticus 25:35-43

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 14:28-29

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 15:7-11

law. This is the kind of nation God wants. This is the kind of kingdom God wants.

Does it sound like capitalism?

- Don't charge interest.
- Let the poor come onto *your* land and eat *your* food that *you* grew in *your* fields.
- Release people from debt even if they don't pay it.
- Don't even try to profit off poor people, but make sure all their needs are met.
- Bring a portion of everything you make and share it with the poor so there are no needy people in the country. (This is, literally, the definition of *communism*.)
- Give to the poor without worrying whether or not they can pay you back.

What kind of society does that sound like to you?

Furthermore, when Jesus came, establishing the Kingdom of God, he taught the exact same things... Give freely to everyone who asks.<sup>1</sup> Sell your possessions and give to the poor.<sup>2</sup> Lend to your enemies, and lend without charging interest.<sup>3</sup> Welcome strangers into your home.<sup>4</sup> Feed those who are hungry.<sup>5</sup> Clothe those who are naked.<sup>6</sup> And so many other things like these.

Jesus didn't encourage capitalism. He didn't encourage his followers to build businesses, build wealth, and create a better life for themselves. He didn't teach people to fight for their own rights and their own freedoms. He didn't encourage Christians to become the capitalist, business-loving, wealth-promoting, money-lovers they've become today. He said, "Woe to you who are rich, because you have had your easy life. Woe to you who are well-fed now, because you will be hungry."<sup>7</sup>

Jesus is not a capitalist. God is not a capitalist. God demands that his people prioritize the needs of others. He demands that his people pick the needy out of the ashes – not that they provide a way for the needy to pick themselves up by their own bootstraps. God demands that his people love one

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:42; Luke 6:30

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 12:33, 18:22

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-36

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46; Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46; Luke 12:42-44, 14:12-14

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:40, 25:31-46; Luke 3:11, 6:29

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:24-25



another, prioritize one another, meet the needs of one another, sell their possessions to help one another, live simply, and demonstrate his love.

The early Church created an alternative society founded on everything Jesus taught – it was a society where everyone shared everything in common and there were no needy people whatsoever. No one had more than they needed, and no one had less.<sup>1</sup> They worked hard for the good of others – not for themselves. They lowered their own standard of living so everyone would be equal. They eliminated poverty by letting go of their riches. Because that is what God values.

The Bible tells us exactly what kind of society God values. It tells us exactly what kind of society God would set up if he were establishing a nation. Yet, despite this, so many Christians assume that God would want things to be done in His Kingdom exactly like they are in America. They defend a society and a system that is founded on greed, the love of money, and the accumulation of possessions, and they think they're defending something God loves.

But they're deceived.

They think “God” and “Country” go hand-in-hand... but the Kingdom of God is its own kingdom. The Kingdom of God is going to crush all other kingdoms and all other nations.<sup>2</sup> That includes America.

Instead of building their values and lifestyle around what God said, Christians build their values and lifestyle around what the world says. That is the world's evil influence James warned us about. It's one way Christians have allowed themselves to be conformed to this world. They've let the world around them mold their beliefs and shape their worldview rather than receiving their beliefs and worldview from God and God alone.

Don't get me wrong; I get that history is full of some awful crimes against humanity in many communist countries. History is also full of some awful crimes against humanity due to capitalism (but most Christians don't even know that). However – historically speaking, what makes communism fail? When things have gone bad, what happened that made it evil? What caused the atrocities that everyone remembers whenever someone mentions communism? It's always the leadership – the king at the top – the guy getting rich off everyone else, thinking more about himself than all the people of his kingdom. He gets richer and his people get poorer.

But that's exactly the point. The Bible doesn't tell you to change America. The Bible tells you to change yourself. The Bible tells you to die and become a citizen of a different kingdom – the Kingdom of God. The Bible

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35; 2 Corinthians 8:8-15; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Daniel 2:44; Ephesians 1:21-23; Philippians 2:9-11

says the Church needs to be different. The Church is an alternative society within a society. The Kingdom of God is its own kingdom. It has its own laws. And it has its own King. When Christians say they don't want to live the way the Bible says to live because "it sounds like communism," the only reason they say that is because communism consistently fails due to evil kings.

In other words, they're accusing the King of being evil.

If everyone shares everything because they died to this world, they rose from the dead, the King lives in their hearts, the Law is written on their hearts, and they're doing it willingly – then it works. We see that clearly in the Book of Acts. We see that with the Macedonians. We see that as Paul collected a gift from all the Gentile Churches and brought it back to Jerusalem. It worked! But it only works if everyone genuinely cares more about others than they do themselves. I get that maybe it doesn't work in a fallen world within a human kingdom; but it does work in the Kingdom of God. But it requires Christians to stop loving themselves. It requires Christians to stop loving money. It requires Christians to stop loving pleasure.

It requires Christians to stop hating God. It requires Christians to stop being influenced by the world. It requires Christians to be different than everyone else. It requires holiness.

The world's evil influence isn't just bad movies, sex scenes, language, violence, and drugs. The world's evil influence is how it tells you that it's okay to look out for yourself. The world's evil influence is what convinces Christians that it's okay to live the American dream.

Jesus didn't come to this earth, make himself nothing, become a servant, suffer, and die to make us people who sit around enjoying the things of this world. This world is God's enemy. The Kingdom of God is going to crush all the nations of the world because of the evil ways they live.

Jesus came and died to make us people who are different. He came to make us people who no longer live for ourselves.<sup>1</sup> He came to make us people who are holy. Being holy means our priorities get in line with what God values. Being holy means our time is spent doing what God values. Being holy means our money is spent doing what God values.

Being holy means we no longer live the American Dream. Being holy means we no longer live like Americans. Being holy means we're different. Being different means we stop trying to enjoy all the pleasures of life. We stop accepting all the entertainment of the world. We stop accepting all the things the world tells us we need. It means we stop living like Americans and we start living like Christians – we live simply so we can help others.

We live in a society that tries to tell us that we need the things of this

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

life and the things of this world. The Bible told us the Church would eventually accept those lies and become an adulterous, apostate people. When we look at the Church today, we can see that it's true. It's time for Christians to become different. It's time for Christians to become holy – to separate from the world and stop accepting its lies, to stop accepting all the things the world says we need to have, and all the things the world says we need to be doing with our lives. It's time for Christians to simplify.

If you're a Christian, you belong to the Kingdom of God. If you're a Christian, you live the way Jesus said to live; you don't accept the culture of the world around you, and you don't accept its stuff, its pleasures, and its entertainment. Being a Christian means we're different. Being a Christian means we don't conform to the world. We don't let the world influence us.

So, be different.

If you spend your time, money or energy on entertainment, possessions, vacations, music, restaurants, pleasure, or anything similar, you are proving through your actions that you do not love God. Your actions speak louder than your words. Your actions show what you truly want and what you're truly living for. Do your actions line up with what God wants? Do your actions line up with what Jesus taught? Do your actions fit into the Kingdom of God?

Stop loving the world. Stop accepting the things of this world. If you do, the love of the Father is not in you. Christ died for all so that those who live will no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them.<sup>1</sup> So, go live for him and not yourself. Go build your life around living for him, and spend your time living for him. Spend your money living for him. Spend your energy living for him. Simplify your life so you have more to give. Stop spending yourself on this world. Stop giving yourself over to God's enemy. Stop hating God according to the biblical definition of what it means to hate God.

Go be different.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

# Chapter 13

## Lies Christians Believe About The Narrow Road

As we've been discussing, God wants us to be people who are different than the world – people who are holy. That's what the word *holy* means; it means we are different and we are not like them. He wants us to not be influenced by the world – He wants us to not adopt their views, their lifestyle, and their values. Paul said we shouldn't be conformed to this world.<sup>1</sup>

God wants us to be people who seek first the Kingdom – seeking it first means it's our biggest priority. It's what comes first in our decisions and how we choose to spend our time, money, and energy. Seeking first the Kingdom means it is what we live for – it's what our decisions are centered around, it's what our money is spent on, it's what our time is given to. We build our lives around the kingdom.

As I mentioned earlier, if you work a normal 9-5 job, Monday to Friday, and I call you up to see if you want to do something at noon on Wednesday, you will likely say no. Why? Because you prioritize work. Work is what pays your bills, it gives you food, it gives you a house, it gives you clothes – therefore, you won't jeopardize it. You're not going to risk losing your job – so your job is a higher priority than hanging out. Between those two things, you're seeking first your job. Your decisions about what you're going to do with your time show what your priority is. You might want to hang out and do something fun, but you choose your job because your job is the priority. Your actions – your priorities – show what you're seeking first.

We've talked about what this looks like on a small scale – what you do day-to-day. But it's important to recognize what this looks like on a bigger scale – what you're doing with your life – your whole life. What are you working towards? What are your goals? What are your big decisions based on?

In order to look at this, we need to look at what the average Christian life in America looks like. What does life typically look like for a Christian in America (or quite frankly, the entire Western world)?

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 12:1-2

This is what life currently looks like for most Christians:

**CHILDHOOD.** You grow up as a child under the authority of your parents. Usually you spend much of your time going to school, doing homework, and studying.

**HIGH SCHOOL.** As you get older, you start getting a little more freedom – you start dating, you start working a job, and you start planning for your future – where do you want to go to college, what do you want to be when you grow up, etc.?

**YOUNG ADULT.** After you graduate high school, you now have the freedom to start making some big decisions for yourself. You go to college. You get a degree. You get a job. Maybe you get married. You're starting to build your own life.

**CAREER.** Eventually you end up settling into a career. Your goal is to make what you need to provide for your family. You want to make sure you're giving your family the best life you can give them. You want to have a decent retirement package. You want that nice work-life balance so you can spend the right amount of time with your family, while still making sure the bills get paid. Primarily, your career is about providing for yourself and your family. Secondly, your career is about planning for retirement so you will have what you need once you stop working. Thirdly, your career might be about something you enjoy – it makes you feel fulfilled, and you feel like you're contributing to the world. Ideally, you want to enjoy your job, but this is not as high a priority as making sure your needs are met, so not everyone ends up in a career they enjoy.

**FAMILY.** As you work your career, you also raise your kids. Or, maybe, your spouse works while you raise the kids full-time. Raising kids has its difficulties – it's exhausting at times, it consumes a lot of time, kids are expensive, and you often worry about their safety or their futures. But, having kids is also very rewarding – you love watching them grow, you love watching them learn, you love watching them learn how to walk, how to talk, and how to think. You love spending time with them, and you love having them around.

**RETIREMENT.** After about thirty or so years in the workplace, you (or your spouse) retire. By now you've saved up enough in whatever retirement plan you chose; hopefully you'll have what you need for the rest of your life, and you can sit back and enjoy no longer having to work all day every day. Typically, you'll have grown kids who are starting to have their own families, and maybe you'll make sure

you're living near them so you can see your grandkids and keep your family close together.

**DEATH.** Eventually, you die. You lived a long life. You provided a good life for your family. You had what you needed through retirement. You saw your grandkids get older and start making their own decisions. Life was good.

**MINISTRY.** Oh yeah, and also, throughout this whole time, you were reading your Bible, you went to Church, you prayed, you sang worship songs, you went on missions trips, you evangelized, and you faithfully gave ten percent of everything you made.

That's the average Christian life in America and in much of the Western world. It's the life almost all Christians plan. It's the life almost all Christians experience. Keep this in the back of your mind for a minute – we'll come back to it.

Jesus said, "Enter through the narrow gate. The gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and many people enter through that gate. But the gate is small and the road is difficult that leads to true life. Only a few people find that road."<sup>1</sup>

Here, Jesus described two roads: One road is wide. It's easy. Many people choose that road because it's wide and easy. However, that road results in destruction. The second road is narrow. It's difficult. It's full of hardships and trials. The gate at the end of that road is small. But this road results in life, and only a few people find that road and travel down that road.

Which of these two roads are you on?

Most Christians are familiar with this passage. But most Christians make a mistake when they think about this passage. They make the mistake of thinking that the broad easy road is a road with no difficulties at all. They look at the difficulties in their own lives, and they assume they're on the narrow, difficult road.

I've heard many Christians talk about "trials" in their lives. They talk about raising kids, being tired from raising kids, having to find a job, passing a test, getting good grades, getting a raise, being laid off, sickness, death, and many other similar things. They talk about how they're going through a trial. They talk about being tested.

But there's a problem. All of those "trials" are common to human life. Even unbelievers face all those same exact trials. So, are those the difficulties that Jesus was talking about when he said the way is narrow and difficult that leads to life?

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 7:13-14

## DEAD CHURCH

Let me give you an analogy: I grew up in the Washington DC area. I lived about an hour north of DC. If I ever found myself wanting to leave DC at 5pm on a weekday... it was awful. Almost everyone in the city chooses the same road – it’s a broad, four or five-lane highway called I-495. If you choose I-495 as your route to get home, you’re choosing to sit in bumper-to-bumper traffic for what seems like an eternity. People cut in and out recklessly, lanes merge together, sometimes you have to get across all four lanes to get to your exit. There are often accidents, and when there are accidents, they often close one or two of the travel lanes, making traffic even worse. No one likes driving home on that road. No one thinks of it as an easy drive.

But now let’s imagine there’s another road – a second option. We’ll call this other road *Forest Road 7*. This road also leaves Washington DC and heads north, and it is also a possible route to get home at 5pm. But this road is unpaved. In some places, it doesn’t even have gravel – it’s just dirt, or even grass. It’s full of potholes and steep inclines. It’s narrow – sometimes it’s barely even wide enough for your car while it travels along a steep drop-off that would send you plummeting into the Potomac River – and there’s no guard rail. At some points, the road is overgrown because it’s so hardly used. You might have to get out occasionally with a machete to chop back some of the bushes that are growing out into your path. Sometimes you’ll come across trees that have come down across the road, and you’ll need to move them before you can keep going. Also, due to new environmental laws, you’re not driving a Jeep or a pickup truck – you’re driving a Prius with low clearance and thin tires that really weren’t meant to roll over potholes and large rocks.

With these two roads as your only options, which road will most people choose? Which road is the broad and easy road, and which road is narrow and difficult?

Often Christians look at their lives and see difficulties and things that make their lives hard, and they assume they’re on the narrow and difficult road because of those difficult things. But what they fail to recognize is that all those difficulties are things that any unbeliever might also face.

When Jesus said the road is broad and easy that leads to destruction, he wasn’t saying it’s a road with no difficulties at all; he was saying that when you compare the two roads, one of them is clearly broad and easy compared to the other. No one would ever say that I-495 is a fun road to go down at 5pm on a workday. In fact, it’s awful. But it’s much easier than trying to drive home on Forest Road 7.

If Christians think they’re facing trials and difficulties, but those trials and difficulties are no different than what any unbeliever might also face, are they facing the same trials and difficulties that Jesus was talking about when he told us about the narrow and difficult road? Or are they merely facing trials

and difficulties that are inherent in life simply because we live in a messed-up world, and life is hard? Which road are they really traveling on?

If Christians are convinced that I-495 is the difficult road, they might not even realize that Forest Road 7 exists. They might not even realize there's another way, a harder way.

Let's go back again to the average Christian life in America.

When a Christian goes through life, how are they making their major decisions? And other than the fact that they read their Bibles and went to Church throughout their whole life, how was their life any different than an unbeliever's life?

Based on what Jesus said about the narrow road and the broad road, the Christian life is supposed to be so different from an unbeliever's life that it makes the unbeliever's life look easy and trouble-free. So, then how is it that the Christian life and the non-Christian life look nearly identical?

An unbeliever is also brought up as a kid, goes to school, studies, starts dating, gets a job, plans their future, goes to college, gets a degree, starts a career, gets married, raises kids, pays the bills, saves up for retirement, tries to spend time with the family, retires, sees their grandkids, stays close to family, and eventually dies, having lived what is generally accepted as a good life.

The only thing that separates a Christian from an unbeliever is that they read their Bibles, went to Church, and did all those Christian things. But we've already seen in earlier chapters that when Israel was apostate, and when the Pharisees lived in hypocrisy, they also did those same "Christian" things! So, clearly, that's not what God wants. Those things are not what's supposed to separate us and make us different. And honestly, those "Christian" things don't make our lives so hard that an unbeliever's life looks easy in comparison.

So, what makes the true Christian life so different? What makes us holy? How are we supposed to be completely different in how we live our entire lives and make all our major decisions?

To look at this, in the next few chapters, we'll break up the average Christian life into three categories: Work, Family, and Ministry. We're going to look at what the Bible says we should be doing in each of these categories, and what it means to seek first the kingdom in everything we do. I can't cover every aspect of life, but these are three major areas that we build our lives around, and we need to see what the Bible says we should be doing when we make these kinds of major decisions. The same concept that I'm applying to these categories applies to every other category in life.



# Chapter 14

## Lies Christians Believe About Financial Wisdom

When it comes to education, work, or finances, Christians tend to make one really big mistake that effects their entire lives: they use the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of God.

In other words, Christians are aware that they need to make “wise” decisions – they say that all the time. But when they approach those decisions, instead of figuring out what God values and what the Bible says a Christian life should look like, they approach decisions the same way the world does.

But the Bible distinguishes between the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. Paul said, “It is written in the Scriptures: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; and I will bring to nothing the intelligence of the intelligent.’ Where is the wise person? Where is the educated person? Where is the philosopher of this world? God has made the wisdom of the world foolish... God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong...”<sup>1</sup>

“Do not deceive yourselves. If you think you are wise in this world, you should become a fool so that you can become truly wise, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God.”<sup>2</sup>

God’s wisdom is not the same thing as the world’s wisdom. The world’s wisdom is about thinking through things practically and understanding how the world works. But the wisdom of God begins with the fear of the Lord.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom...”<sup>3</sup>

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom because the fear of the LORD gets us to stop being concerned with things that don’t matter, and it gets us to start being concerned with things that are important! The fear of the LORD is when we start thinking, “Wow, nothing in this life is important other than doing the things God wants me to do.” It’s when we adopt the mindset of Paul: “To me the only important thing about living is Christ...”<sup>4</sup>

The fear of the LORD causes us to stop living for the trivial things of this life, and to start living for the eternal things that God offers us. The fear

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:19-20, 27

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Philippians 1:21

of the LORD causes us to seek first God’s Kingdom because we realize that his Kingdom is the one and only thing that truly matters in this life. Nothing else matters – not your job, your house, your friendships, or your comfort. None of that matters. As Paul said to the Corinthians, “Our only goal is to please God whether we live here or there, because we must all stand before Christ to be judged. Each of us will receive what we should get – good or bad – for the things we did in the earthly body. Therefore since we know what it means to fear the Lord, we try to persuade people.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul was saying that the only thing we should be thinking about is how to please God because we’re going to have to stand before Christ to be judged. He then said that knowing this, and making your decisions around this, is what it means to fear the Lord.

Fearing God is about making your decisions around what *he* says is important. That’s the beginning of wisdom.

This all comes back down to priorities. It all comes back down to what we build our lives around. Doing what God wants and living for his Kingdom should be our biggest priority. It should be what drives our decisions. It should be how we decide what to do with our lives or what to spend our time doing.

This is what’s missing in the world’s wisdom. The world says you should pick your education *so that* you can have the best degree *so that* you can have the best career *so that* you can always have what you need, you can provide for your family, and you can save for retirement.

Christians have adopted this wisdom. They’ve accepted this lifestyle. They think that this is what it means to be “wise” when planning their futures. But this isn’t God’s wisdom. God’s wisdom isn’t concerned with making sure you have the best job so your needs are met, you can provide for your family, and save for retirement. God’s wisdom says, “Be concerned above all else with God’s kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well.”<sup>2</sup>

“Don’t always think about what you will eat or what you will drink, and don’t keep worrying. All the Gentiles in the world are trying to get these things, and your Father knows you need them. But seek God’s kingdom, and all your other needs will be met as well.”<sup>3</sup>

The wisdom of God is centered on the Kingdom. The wisdom of God is centered on living the kind of life that God wants us to live – a life defined by love.

When James wrote about the wisdom that comes from God, he said,

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:9-11

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:29-31

“Are there those among you who are truly wise and understanding? Then they should show it by living right and doing good things with a humility that comes from wisdom... But the wisdom that comes from God is first of all pure, then peace-loving, gentle, and willing to yield. This wisdom is always ready to help those who are troubled and to do good for others. It is always fair and honest.”<sup>1</sup>

So, the wisdom of the world says things like, “it’s wise to have a good education in order to have a well-paying job so you can have a healthy savings account, a stable life, and a well-rounded retirement package.” But true biblical wisdom is when you’re always ready to help others and do good for others. It means we use our time and our money for the Kingdom of God, we give to those in need, and we give more than we think we can give, because we trust in God’s provision.

The world’s wisdom tells us we need a good education and a good job because the world’s wisdom tells us we need to look out for our own needs.

Jesus himself said it – all the Gentiles are worrying about what they’re going to eat, what they’re going to drink, and what they’re going to wear. In other words, all the Gentiles are worried about how to get the bills paid. All the Gentiles make their decisions about their education and career based on their own needs and their own bills.

Jesus said we should be different.

We should be people who prioritize the Kingdom of God. We should be people who choose to spend our lives doing what the Kingdom of God says to do. We shouldn’t be people who make our decisions and plan our lives around how to pay the bills – that’s what the Gentiles do. Or, in other words, that’s what unbelievers do. We’re supposed to be different. We’re supposed to be holy.

When Jesus told us to seek first the Kingdom, he also gave us a promise: if we do, God will meet our needs. He promised us – God knows our needs, and he will take care of us. Do you really believe that?

As we’ve been discussing throughout this book, your actions prove what you believe. It’s not what you *say* – what you *do* proves what you really believe. That’s how you know whether you really have faith. Your actions speak louder than words. So, when you read Jesus’ promise that God will meet your needs, do your actions and your lifestyle match what you say with your words? Or do your actions and your words prove that you don’t really believe Jesus when he said this? Your actions and your lifestyle also prove what you really *want* – they prove what you’re seeking first. So, do your decisions about your life prove that your priorities are to seek first your own needs? Or do your

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<sup>1</sup> James 3:13,17

decisions prove that your priorities are to seek first the Kingdom... even if, practically, it seems kind of stupid?

As Christians, we're supposed to look stupid. That's what Paul meant when he said, "If you think you are wise in this world, you should become a fool so that you can become truly wise, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God."<sup>1</sup>

The wisdom of the world is foolishness to God, and the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world. In other words, God thinks the world's priorities are stupid, and the world thinks that God's priorities are stupid. If we're going through life prioritizing the same things the world prioritizes... God thinks we're being stupid: We're prioritizing a short, temporary life that passes relatively quickly. We're not prioritizing the eternal Kingdom of God!

While talking about money, Jesus said, "What is important to people is an abomination in God's sight."<sup>2</sup>

The world tells people that money is important. The world tells people they need a good college degree so they can have a well-paying job. The world tells people they need to give their families nice, comfortable, cushy lives. The world tells people it's important to save up for retirement.

But Jesus said that what's important to people is an abomination to God.

That means more than just "he thinks it's stupid." That means God hates what people think is important. That means God hates the way the world thinks about things! He hates the wisdom of the world and the way the world convinces people they should live. So, Christians shouldn't use the world's wisdom and the world's logic to make their decisions. They should use God's wisdom.

It makes sense that the world would think this is stupid. The people of the world (who don't believe God even exists) would see you thinking that your needs will be met by God as long as you obey him. They would look at you and say, "You're crazy. You can't do that! You need to prepare for your future! You need to look out for yourself and your own needs!"

God's wisdom only makes sense if you truly do have the Living God looking out for your needs. If you truly live by these verses, the world will think you're stupid. But what kind of light will you shine into the world when you live this way and God actually does provide for all your needs? Jesus doesn't want us looking like everyone else in the world. He wants us looking different. He wants us to shine like a light in the darkness!

What's more important to you – making sure your basic needs are met,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:18-19

<sup>2</sup> Luke 16:15

or shining in front of other people and letting them see with their own eyes that you serve a God who is living and real? What's more important to you – planning your retirement for the last thirty or so years of your life, or living for the Kingdom, which will last for eternity?

Where are your priorities?

If you have the Living God looking out for your needs, then let me ask you: Do you need a good college education? Do you need a high-paying job? Do you need a well-rounded retirement package?

Is that the wisdom of God? Or are you making decisions using the wisdom of the world and the financial advice from the world?

A lot of Christians think they're planning their finances using God's wisdom. They talk about "biblical finances" and how to handle money. But the financial advice they follow is literally the exact same thing you'd find in any secular financial-planning book. Just because it's taught by someone who claims to be a Christian doesn't make it any different.

The world thinks you need a good college degree. The world thinks you need a high-paying job. The world thinks you should set some money aside in a savings account. The world thinks you need to save for retirement.

Jesus clearly taught the opposite.

What did Jesus have to say about going to college so that you can get a good job?

"So I tell you, don't worry about the food or drink you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body."<sup>1</sup>

"Be concerned above all else with God's kingdom and his righteousness. Then all your other needs will be met as well. So don't worry about tomorrow..."<sup>2</sup>

"And what is the seed that fell among the thorny weeds? That seed is like the person who hears the teaching but lets worries about this life and the deceitfulness of wealth stop that teaching from growing. So the teaching does not produce fruit in that person's life."<sup>3</sup>

Christians are very familiar with these verses (and many others like it), but like so many other topics we've talked about throughout this book, they miss the *point* of what Jesus said because they bring their own definitions into Scripture.

Christians think they don't "worry" about food, drink, clothing, or the future because they assume that they know what it means to worry. They think it means getting stressed about something. They think it means doubting that

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:25

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 6:33-34

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:22

you'll have those things. They think you're only worrying if you're upset about it.

They often think you can only worry about something if you don't have it or you don't know where it's going to come from.

This is true of my own life. I grew up in the Church, I graduated high school, I got a job, I moved up in that job, I got promotions and pay-raises until I reached the point where I was managing the day-to-day operations and sales of the entire business. I wasn't making a ton of money, but I was young and single, I lived with family, and I had everything I needed. I remember at that time reading what Jesus said, "Don't worry, seek first the kingdom," and I thought, "I don't really know how to apply this to my life, because I don't worry about what I'm going to eat, drink or wear. I don't worry about how to get the bills paid. I have a job. Is Jesus telling me not to worry because I'm getting another paycheck in a couple weeks? That doesn't seem right... Maybe this just doesn't apply to me right now? Maybe this is like... if I get laid off or something."

When I read that verse, I didn't know what to do with it. I wasn't worried. My needs were being met! I thought maybe my needs were being met because I was seeking first the Kingdom... after all, Church was a very big part of my life. I never missed a Church service, I served in the Church, I had even worked at my Church for many years, I went to small group meetings, I read my Bible, I prayed very often, I sang worship songs, I memorized Bible verses, I went on missions trips, I led Bible studies, I organized prayer meetings... and I thought perhaps that's why my needs were being met.

What never occurred to me was the simple truth: my needs were being met because I was seeking first my needs. I wasn't seeking first the Kingdom. I was worrying.

How was I worrying without realizing I was worrying?

My priorities.

Instead of searching Scripture and finding the things Jesus said to do, and doing them... I got a job. Instead of building every aspect of my life around what God wants us to do, I built my life around making sure I could pay the bills. Instead of trusting in God's provision, I trusted in my job and only *thought* I was trusting in God's provision.

By the very fact that I had a 9 to 5, Monday to Friday steady-paying job, and the fact that that job always took priority over my plans – my actions proved that that job was my priority. It was what I was seeking first. Why? Because it paid the bills. Because it gave me what I needed to eat, drink, wear, and more.

I thought that "worrying about my needs" meant being nervous about my needs. But it doesn't.

You're worrying about your needs if you spend your time making sure your needs are met. If you just assume you need a good education and a good career to meet your needs, so you get a good education and a good career, then you're worrying about your needs. The Kingdom is not what you're seeking first. Your needs are what you're seeking first, and the Kingdom is falling to the side – you'll get to it when you're not working.

Christians often build their lives around their careers. Their jobs come first. Their education comes first. Their careers come first. When they plan their lives or set their goals, work comes first. Christians see the promises Jesus gave us. They see that he said if we seek the Kingdom first, God will make sure our needs are met. They think they believe these promises. They think they trust these promises. But their actions prove they don't. Their actions prove that they don't trust Jesus. Their priorities prove that they think they need to make sure their own needs are met.

When you build your life around your career – you're seeking a pay raise, you're seeking a promotion, you're seeking higher education so you can make more money, you're seeking a better retirement plan, or better benefits, or anything else like this – then you're not building your life around the Kingdom. It's one or the other. You can't build your life around both.

If you're building your life around your career, then you're not seeking first the Kingdom, you're not trusting in Jesus' promises, and you're not meeting the conditions of Jesus' promise. If you're not seeking first the Kingdom, there's no guarantee that your needs will be met.

When you're not seeking first the Kingdom, you're trusting money – not God. You're believing that money is your security. You're believing that your job gives you a future. You're putting your hope in work and money rather than in God's provision.

There's no real security in money. The economy could crash. The value of the US dollar could crash. Your business could go under. You could get laid off. You could get sick, go to the hospital, and have completely unexpected expenses that you can't afford.

People trust money because it provides a false sense of security. It makes them feel safe when they're really not. They think they have security because the world tells them it's wise to build up financial security. But that "security" has so many ways it could fall apart.

Jesus said if you want true security, you must seek the Kingdom first rather than financial security. The Kingdom must come before your job. The Kingdom must come before your retirement. The Kingdom must come first.

The only true security is when God promises to meet your needs. But he said he'll only do that if you seek first the Kingdom.

Let's talk about retirement.

Jesus told us to seek first the Kingdom and God would meet all our needs. His very next statement was, "So don't worry about tomorrow..."<sup>1</sup>

If we're not supposed to worry about tomorrow... meaning, we're not supposed to spend our time, our money, and our energy trying to meet our own needs for tomorrow – then why would it be okay for us to worry about the last few years of our lives?

So many Christians think it's extremely important to have a good retirement plan. They think this is one of the most important things in life – you must make sure you save money for your future.

The most popular "Christian" teachers who teach "biblical" finances teach the exact same thing the world teaches – you have to save money for retirement. They teach you to set money aside. Store it up. Make sure you have what you need in your later years so you don't have to keep working a job, and you can sit back and enjoy the last few years of your life. They teach Christians how to build wealth.

But here's another popular Christian teacher who taught the exact opposite:

"Then Jesus told this parable: 'There was a rich man who had some land, which grew a good crop. He thought to himself, "What will I do? I have no place to keep all my crops." Then he said, "This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and other goods. Then I can say to myself, 'I have enough good things stored to last for many years. Take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy life!'" But God said to him, 'Foolish man! Tonight your life will be taken from you. So who will get those things you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be for those who store up things for themselves and are not rich in what matters to God.'<sup>2</sup>

Christians today are doing exactly what the rich man in this parable did: they're storing up stuff for their future because they've been told that it's wisdom to prepare for retirement. They're setting money aside so that in their later years, they'll have enough to last for many years, so they can take it easy, eat, drink, and enjoy life.

But Jesus said those who do this will lose everything. If you're rich in storing up for your future, but you're not rich in what matters to God, you're going to lose everything.

Money provides no true security. What if you work full-time for thirty-five years, and then die the day after you retire? It happens. I've heard that exact thing happen to numerous people. If that happens to you, what did you

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:34

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:16-21



do with your life? What did it count for? What did you accomplish? What did your retirement plan gain you?

Even if you don't die young, even if you live to a nice old age – it doesn't mean you weren't this rich man who lost everything. Why? Because you're thinking that all you have to do is plan for the last thirty years of your life. What are you going to do for the next two million years? Everything you planned for your future was spent in just a few short years in this life. You forgot about eternity!

You planned everything according to the wisdom of the world! You took *their* financial advice instead of the advice of Jesus!

Jesus gave his financial advice shortly after telling this parable:

“So I tell you, don't worry about the food you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes... Don't always think about what you will eat or what you will drink, and don't keep worrying... But seek God's kingdom, and all your other needs will be met as well... Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make for yourselves purses that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy.”<sup>1</sup>

Biblical finances is not about having a good job or saving for retirement. It's not about setting money aside or planning for your future. Biblical finances is about living the way God wants you to live because you understand that eternity is real, and the Kingdom is real, and that is your priority.

God wants us focusing on what's actually important. He wants us living for something real. The world thinks it's foolish because the world thinks there is no eternity. Why are Christians accepting the world's advice?

I recently saw an infographic created by a very popular “Christian” teacher who teaches “biblical finances.” This infographic was outlining what he teaches Christians to do with their money. He mentioned paying off debt, he mentioned setting money aside for emergencies, he mentioned setting money aside for retirement, he mentioned building wealth... his very last item on his list was: Give. According to his so-called “biblical” finances, *giving* is what you do *after* you've looked out for yourself.

There was literally nothing about his infographic that was different than what the world teaches about finances. *Giving* isn't the exception. Unbelievers give, too. They give to non-profits; they give to try to help people; they give to humanitarian projects; they do humanitarian work. Giving a small percentage of your money after you've looked out for yourself doesn't make you any different than an unbeliever. There is nothing biblical about this so-

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:22-33

called “biblical finances.” Jesus said the man in his parable was going to lose everything because he looked out for himself first. Jesus said true wisdom is when you prioritize what God cares about – not what men care about.

When Jesus told the church in Sardis that they were dead, he told them, “I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants.”<sup>1</sup>

So many Christians think they’re doing what God wants because they’re doing something that they were told is biblical. They’re so quick to just blindly follow anything that any man says. They think that if someone says it’s biblical then it must be biblical. Instead of getting their instructions from Scripture directly, they just accept whatever they’re told. And they end up doing something that is less than what God wants.

God told us what he wants; it’s very clear in the Bible. True biblical finances is when you’re like the widow who gave everything she had to live on.<sup>2</sup> True biblical finances is when you’re like the Macedonians who gave more than they could afford to give.<sup>3</sup> True biblical finances is when you make your decisions based on what’s good for others, not what’s good for yourself.<sup>4</sup> True biblical finances is what Paul said to Timothy:

“Command those who are rich with things of this world not to be proud. Tell them to hope in God, not in their uncertain riches. God richly gives us everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to be rich in doing good deeds, to be generous and ready to share. By doing that, they will be storing up a treasure for themselves as a strong foundation for the future. Then they will be able to take hold of the life that is true life.”<sup>5</sup>

True biblical finances is when you plan for your entire future – not just your old age in this life. True biblical finances is when you put your hope in God, not your financial plan. True biblical finances is when you find your enjoyment in giving what you have to others.<sup>6</sup> True biblical finances is when you’re rich in doing good deeds – when you’re *biblically* generous, not *worldly* generous.

Christians are so quick to accept the world’s definitions. They accept the world’s definition of *rich*, and they accept the world’s definition of *generous*. So, they read what Paul wrote to Timothy and they don’t understand that it’s talking about them. Being rich according to the Bible is not what people think it means to be rich; according to the Bible, being rich means you have more

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 3:2

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:1-5

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-23, 19:21-24; Luke 6:30-36, 6:38, 12:33-34, 16:19-31, 19:1-10; Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-37, 5:1-11, 20:33-35; Romans 12:8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Ephesians 4:28; 1 Timothy 6:5-19; James 5:1-6; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>5</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Proverbs 12:12, 21:26, 22:9, 29:7

than what you need to survive. Jesus said your *needs* are what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, and what you're going to wear.<sup>1</sup> In the same context of what we just read, Paul said to Timothy that if you have food and clothes you should be satisfied with that.<sup>2</sup> Those are your needs.

If you have more than what you need, you are rich according to the Bible. You can't accept the world's definition of what it means to be rich.

So many Christians think they're not rich because they compare themselves to people who have more than they do. That's not God's definition. That's not God's perspective. God's perspective is about what you need to live. If you have more than you need to live – what you're going to eat, what you're going to drink, what you're going to wear – if you have more than that, you're rich. And this verse is about you.

And, being generous is not the world's definition of *generous*. God's definition of *generous* is when you give more than you think you can afford to give. God's definition of *generous* is when you put their needs above your own.<sup>3</sup> God's definition of *generous* is not about how much you give; it's about how much you hold back.<sup>4</sup> If you're holding back, you're not being generous. If you have more than you need to live but you're holding some of it back for yourself, you're not generous according to God.

You need to start reading the Bible with God's perspective and forget about the world's definitions. God does not want you to be generous according to Satan's definition of *generosity*! God holds you to a higher standard than you think he does.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he was describing almost every American – even those who live poor lives in America have so much more than they need to live. They have so much more than just food and clothes. We touched on this earlier – if you have the world's possessions, if you spend your time and your money on stuff, entertainment, and pleasure, then you have more than you need to live. You are rich according to Scripture.

And, if you continue looking out for yourself, you are not following Jesus. If you continue thinking you need those things – you're not selling your possessions, you're not giving to the poor – you are not being generous. You are rich; you are rich in the things of this world, and you are not rich in doing good deeds like Paul said you're supposed to. You are not rich in what matters to God.

So, stop accepting the world's definitions. Stop thinking things in the Bible don't apply to you because you don't think of yourself as rich. If you get

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:31-34; Luke 12:22-31

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 6:6-10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Corinthians 9:1-27; Philippians 2:2-8; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:31-34; Luke 12:22-31; 2 Corinthians 8:11-12

to judgment day and find out that God had a different perspective than you, you're going to wish you had changed now. God's perspective is not your perspective.

True biblical finances is when you are ready to share everything, live a simple life, and make sure the needs of those around you are met before you look out for yourself. True biblical finances is when you store up a strong foundation for the future – something you're not going to lose after you die. That's true biblical finances. False biblical finances are when the servants of Satan, disguised as servants of righteousness,<sup>1</sup> come and tell you to store up your money and plan for your future and only give a little when you can.

Jesus didn't give his life so you can have a good career and a sound retirement. Jesus gave his life to make you someone who no longer lives for yourself. As we've already seen, Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus gave his life to make you someone who no longer lives for yourself. He didn't give his life to make you someone that keeps living exactly like the world.

If you live for your retirement and spend all your time building up your retirement, you're living for yourself. If you spend forty hours or more every week to look out for yourself and make sure you have everything you need to eat, drink, wear, retire, and more, then you're not seeking first the Kingdom. You're seeking first your own needs. You are disobeying Jesus.

"A soldier wants to please the commanding officer, so no one serving in the army wastes time with everyday matters."<sup>3</sup>

Are you wasting time with everyday matters of this life, or are you only trying to please your commanding officer? To a Christian, the Kingdom of God must be everything – not your career. Living for God is all that's important. It's the only true priority.

Christians are supposed to look different than the world. The world assumes that when you graduate high school, you'll go to college, get a degree, get a job, work for thirty or more years, then retire. Christians are supposed to look different. If they don't look different, they're not holy. If they don't look different, they conformed to the image of the world.

The Christian life should not be built around a career. It shouldn't be built around education, work or financial stability. The Christian life should be centered on what God wants – living for his Kingdom and obeying his

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>3</sup> 2 Timothy 2:4

commands.

However, to be clear, this does not mean we're not supposed to work! There are a number of Christians who use these (and other) verses to defend a lifestyle in which they don't work – they go through life, trusting God to provide and meet all their needs. But they're missing the point. And, as a result, they're disobeying what is most important about these instructions.

There are other Christians in the opposite crowd. They educate themselves and work long hours, building their careers, and they point to some of Paul's letters to defend themselves. After all, when Paul wrote to Christians, he clearly told them to work:

“When I was with you, I never wanted anyone's money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did that you should work as I did...”<sup>1</sup>

“Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands.”<sup>2</sup>

“Brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we command you to stay away from any believer who lives in idleness and does not follow the tradition you received from us. You yourselves know that you should live as we live. We were not idle when we were with you. And when we ate another person's food, we always paid for it. We worked very hard night and day so we would not be an expense to any of you... When we were with you, we gave you this rule: ‘Anyone who is not willing to work should not eat.’”<sup>3</sup>

What was Paul saying?

First, we need to realize that Christians will often read Bible verses and assume that just because they read it, they understand it. Or, in other words, they see what the words say, but they miss what the writer was saying.

That's probably still confusing... Let's try it this way...

Jesus and Paul both said that all of the Law and the Prophets were summed up in love: love God, and love your neighbor.<sup>4</sup> If Jesus and Paul could both say that the Law and the Prophets are summed up in love, then they were saying we need to understand the *point* of what was said when we read the Law and the Prophets. And that point is *love*. Everything in Scripture has a point. It's not enough to just know the words. You have to understand the point of what was said.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:33-35

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:28

<sup>3</sup> 2 Thessalonians 3:6-10

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14

If we read any individual verse or passage and focus on the words it literally says but miss the *point* of what it's saying, then we don't actually understand that verse, even if we think we do.

For example, Moses told the people of Israel to keep certain feasts; he told them to offer sacrifices; he told them to keep the Sabbath; he told them to fast; he told them to sing songs; he told them to pray.<sup>1</sup> But then later, God sent the prophets to Israel and told them, "I hate your feasts; I hate your sacrifices; I hate your Sabbaths; I hate your fasts; I hate your songs; I hate your prayers."<sup>2</sup>

They were doing what the Bible verses said to do! But God hated it. Why? Because they missed the point. And because they missed the point, they weren't actually obeying God. They weren't doing what God said to do even though they were doing what those verses said to do.

The same is true today.

Many Christians think they're obeying certain Bible verses because they read what it says and they do what it seems to say, but they miss the whole point.

As we've talked about throughout this book, Paul also said that all his commands have a point. He said, "The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions."<sup>3</sup>

If the things we read in Scripture have a point they're communicating, then we need to make sure we understand the point – not just know what the words say. We need to make sure we're obeying the point of the verse, and not just doing what it seems like the verse is telling us to do. Otherwise we will be just like the Israelites who gave sacrifices and kept the feasts, but God said he hated what they were doing. They didn't get the purpose of it, and they weren't actually obeying what God was telling them to do.

So, when we look at what Paul said about work, what was his *point*?

Many Christians use these verses as an excuse to build their lives around work. They focus on getting a good education so they can have a good career and meet their own needs, the needs of their families, and have a secure retirement. But that's missing the whole point of *why* Paul said to work.

Paul wasn't saying to work just because people should work. He clearly explained *why* we should work – and it's not for any of the typical reasons

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Exodus 15:1-21, 23:14-17, 29:38-45, 30:1-10, 31:12-17, 35:1-3; Leviticus 1-7, 16-17, 23; Numbers 15:1-31, 28-29; Deuteronomy 16:1-17, 32:1-47

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:10-17, 58:1-5; Jeremiah 14:12; Hosea 5:6-7, 8:13; Amos 5:21-23; Zechariah 7:13

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-6 (NLT)

Christians think!

Here are those same verses again, but with just a little more context:

“When I was with you, I never wanted anyone’s money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did that you should work as I did and help the weak. I taught you to remember the words Jesus said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’”<sup>1</sup>

“Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands. Then they will have something to share with those who have need.”<sup>2</sup>

The reason to work isn’t to meet our own needs or our families’ needs or have a secure retirement! The reason to work is so that we can give to those who have needs – because our lives are supposed to be *entirely* about love! Work is not an exception! It’s not about having that dream career you’ve always wanted; it’s not about having good pay; it’s not about finding a job that makes you feel fulfilled. It’s about positioning yourself to be able to give to others and meet their needs. That’s *why* God wants you to work.

If you look at the passage I quoted earlier from 2 Thessalonians, you can see the same thing there. But you need to recognize Paul’s point – not just what he said. He said, “If you don’t work, you don’t eat.” But we know from elsewhere that all his commands were about love. We also know from these other verses that when he told people to work, it was about love – it was about meeting needs. He wanted them to remember the example he set, and he even pointed out what that example was – he chose to not be an expense on them.

So, what was he saying to the Thessalonians?

We need to understand the context: Paul was not writing to an American church. He was writing to one of the early churches – a church that he had taught himself. And Paul taught the same teaching that all the other apostles taught. As John put it, “This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>3</sup>

The Thessalonians would have been a church that was operating like the first Church we see in Acts – they would have been sharing everything in common, meeting the needs of one another, selling their possessions, giving to those in need, and eating together every day.<sup>4</sup> That’s what Jesus taught, and that’s what the apostles taught. It’s what the real Church does.

When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, he told them, “If you don’t

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 20:33-35

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 4:28

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35

work, you don't eat." Why? Because if you live in a community where everyone is sharing everything in common, and one person is not contributing in any way, that person is mooching off everyone else. That person isn't living in love. That person isn't following Jesus. That person is apostate. And what did Paul say about someone who claims to be a brother or sister but is living in apostasy? He said, "Do not even eat with people like that."<sup>1</sup>

When Paul said this to the Corinthians, he warned them, "Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise."<sup>2</sup>

Paul was telling the Thessalonians, "If someone is mooching off everyone else, and not doing what they can to help, they're not a true believer, because they don't have love. Don't let that apostasy spread. If they don't repent, don't keep letting them participate."

Paul was not saying that everyone should build their lives around their jobs so their own needs are always met and they have what they need for retirement. No, Paul was saying, "Love one another."

This is why it is also wrong for Christians to quit their jobs and go through life, trusting God to provide for all their needs. There are many Christians who focus on a few verses (like the ones quoted earlier) and come to the conclusion that they shouldn't work – they should just trust God to provide. But they ignore what Paul said. They ignore the instructions to work. They miss the point.

If someone willingly positions themselves to be a burden on others, and they refuse to repent, Paul said to stop giving to that person – they're not living in love – they're not true Christians. They are doing what is best for themselves with no regard for those around them.

The Christian life is not about power. It is not about an individualistic, personal experience. The Christian life is about the body. It is about everyone else. True Christians don't go through life just trying to have experiences and see God's power. True Christians go through life with their focus on everyone else.

When Christians quit their jobs, refuse to work, and trust God to provide, they inevitably create a burden on everyone else. They care more about their own experience than they do the good of those around them. They often don't even notice how burdensome they are on others because they're not even paying attention. Furthermore, they demonstrate through their actions that they're not concerned with meeting the needs of others. They aren't positioning themselves to help others. They are positioning themselves to be in need of others – not help others with their needs. This is not love,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:11

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6



which means this is disobedience.

Christians are commanded to not build their lives around their careers – but they are also commanded to do what is best for others. We are commanded to love others. It is not love to build your life around your own needs and desires. It is also not love to make yourself dependent on others and require others to take care of your needs. It is love to work hard so that you are not a burden on others, and so that you can give to those in need.

Christians are not called – even by Jesus – to quit their jobs and solely rely on God’s provision. And Christians are not called – even by Paul – to spend their lives getting the best careers and making the most money so they can have the best life and retire.

When Christians work, it doesn’t have to be forty hours every week. It doesn’t have to consume their lives. It doesn’t have to be (and shouldn’t be) what their lives are centered on. A Christian’s job should serve a purpose – to keep them from being a burden on others, and to provide resources to help others. A Christian’s job is simply a tool they can use to accomplish their true goals. It is not a goal in and of itself. Furthermore, if Christians obey the commands to stop loving the world and lower their own standard of living, they won’t have to work as many hours to accomplish their goal.

For a number of years, I felt trapped at my job. I had a good job – a great job, even! I worked from home, and I often finished work in the early afternoon. As soon as I finished work, I was done – I was already home! I could start whatever I wanted to do next! But the more the company grew, the more my hours increased. As I reached the point where I was working forty (or more) hours, I knew something was wrong... not because I was lazy or didn’t want to work. But because, by this point in my life, I knew what Jesus meant when he said to seek first the Kingdom. I knew what his commands were. I knew what God cares about. And I knew the life that he offers to those who obey him.

I would wake up in the mornings and read the Bible for a few hours before starting work. But every day I felt like I would wake up, spend time reading all the things that God wants me to do with my life, and then spend all day not doing them. By the time I finished work, I was tired, it was getting dark, and it was often too late to do what I knew God wanted.

I knew something had to change.

When I prayed about it, the Lord told me, “I’ve been telling you for a year now what you need to do. You already know what to do.” He had been, and I did know. But I hadn’t done it because I was worried. It was a huge step, and I didn’t know how we were going to survive. But I knew what I needed to do. So, I quit my job. I didn’t have another job lined up. I didn’t know how we’d survive. It was one of the scariest things I had ever done. But I knew the

Kingdom had to come first. It couldn't be second; it had to be first.

What happened?

His promises are true. God took care of us. But he was also quick to teach us that we couldn't stay unemployed. We had to find the right balance. We had to figure out how to work so that we could help others – but not consume all our time with work. We couldn't love others if we worked all the time. But we also couldn't love others if we burdened them and had nothing to give to them when they were in need.

Over time, we learned how to find that balance. We made the Kingdom our top priority, and we found ways of working on the side without it consuming all our time. We found God's promises to be true in new ways: God not only directly provided for our needs, but he also provided us with the perfect jobs and opportunities to work. But our jobs were not to provide for ourselves. Our jobs were not to save or build wealth. Our jobs were so we wouldn't be a burden on others, and so we would be ready to help whenever we saw a need.

The Kingdom of God must be first. We still work – but when we work, it cannot be something that gets in the way of what God told us to do – what he told us to do in Scripture, the commands of Jesus that we have from God, the commands that define what it means to be a Christian.<sup>1</sup>

And, when we work, we work *so that* we can help others. We work because we want to be in a position where we can help when we see needs. We work because we want to be able to give, not because we're trying to provide for ourselves. We work so that we don't create any burdens for any brothers or sisters. And we've simplified our lives so that we don't have to work as much and we can still have enough to give.

Christians are called to be different than the world. We're not supposed to look like all the Gentiles (the unbelievers) who are trying to have their needs met. We're called to seek first the Kingdom and not build our lives around getting the bills paid. We're told to focus on eternity and spend our lives doing what God wants: loving one another. Nothing else can get in the way.

We're not called to work a job for the sake of providing for ourselves. And work is not an excuse God will accept if his Kingdom comes second. Seeking first the Kingdom means prioritizing it over your education, your job, and your retirement. None of those things will matter in eternity. The only things that will matter are what you did for the Kingdom.

The only thing that will matter is if you did what God really wants. Are you building your life around doing what God wants? Or, like the church in

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9-10, 2:17, 2:24-25, 3:9-11, 3:16-18, 3:23-24, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-2; 2 John 5-6

## DEAD CHURCH

Sardis, are you doing less than what God wants? Where are your priorities?

# Chapter 15

## Lies Christians Believe About Family and Marriage

As we saw a couple chapters ago, the average Christian life is often very “family-focused.” Christians spend time working a job so they can provide a good life for their families. They spend a lot of time with their kids, and Christians often view their family as their ministry – in other words, they serve God by taking care of their families. They keep their families nearby. They have family get-togethers. They celebrate holidays with their families. They go on vacations with their families.

Growing up in the Church, I was always told that it would be my responsibility to provide for my family. As the “head of the household,” I would need to make sure the family is taken care of, I would need to train the kids well, I would need to make sure the family keeps reading the Bible and going to Church. It wasn’t just that this was something I should make sure happens... I was taught that this is supposed to be my focus.

Almost all Christians have heard that we’re supposed to “focus on the family.” Our Church culture has told us that the Christian life should be centered on the family; and that the family unit is what is most important. We should build good, strong families founded on faith, love, and hope. First and foremost, we should make sure our families have what they need.

Most Christians view family as one of the most important aspects to the Christian life. Many people think that’s what Christianity is all about.

Here’s what Jesus said about family:

“Don’t think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A person’s enemies will be members of his own family. Those who love their father or mother more than they love me are not worthy of me. Those who love their son or daughter more than they love me are not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who try to hold on to their lives will give up true life. Those who give up their lives for my sake will hold on to true life.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, Jesus said something very different than what the Church says

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 10:34-39

today.

Jesus said he came to split up families – not join them together. He said your father, your mother, your son and your daughter need to take a back seat, and the Kingdom of God has to come first – otherwise you’re not worthy of him.

Now, sure, we all understand that we should love God more than our families. Christians often use catchphrases like, “God first, family second.” When Christians say things like this, usually what they mean is, “You should love God first. And God wants you to love your family, so you love your family second.” But if we’re honest with ourselves about what Jesus said, he didn’t say, “God first, family second.” He seemed to be saying, “God first. Period.”

Actually, he seemed to take it even further than that. He seemed to say, “I didn’t come to give you a big happy family, where you all focus on the family and everyone in your family loves each other and gets along. I came to divide your family. I came to split you up. If you follow me, your family will be your enemies. And if that doesn’t settle well with you, you’re not worthy of me.”

I mean... that is what he said.

Jesus came to turn families against each other. The obvious implication is that loving God and obeying God doesn’t mean loving our families or focusing on our families. In fact, Jesus said the opposite. So, where does the Church get this mindset that we should focus on the family? Maybe this passage is just misunderstood, and we should look at some of the other things Jesus had to say about family.

“All those who have left houses, brothers, sisters, father, mother, children, or farms for my name’s sake will get more than they left, and they will inherit eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, Jesus said that those who inherit eternal life will be those who left their families. That’s certainly not saying we should focus on the family, so let’s keep searching.

“Jesus said to another man, ‘Follow me!’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the people who are dead bury their own dead. You must go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another man said, ‘I will follow you, Lord, but first let me go and say goodbye to my family.’ Jesus said, ‘Anyone who begins to plow a field but keeps looking back is of no use in the Kingdom of God.’”<sup>2</sup>

In both passages, Jesus said the same thing he said in the earlier passage: “If you love your family more than you love me, you’re not worthy of me.”

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 19:29

<sup>2</sup> Luke 9:59-62

The first dude just wanted to bury his dad. That's it! He wasn't saying he wouldn't live for the Kingdom. He just said he had to bury his dad first, and then he would live for the Kingdom. But Jesus said, "No. The Kingdom of God must be your number one priority. Even a funeral can't get in the way!"

The second dude was ready to leave his family and follow Jesus – that's a bigger commitment than almost any modern Christian. The Kingdom was so important to him that he was willing to leave his family. Yet Jesus said he was of no use in the Kingdom of God. Why? Because saying goodbye to his family was a higher priority to him than the Kingdom of God.

How do we know it was a higher priority? Because he wanted to do it first.

The Kingdom of God must always be first. The Kingdom of God must remain the top priority. Even family can't come in the way. Jesus does not want people who are divided. Either you're loyal to Jesus, or you're not. Either you have fidelity, or you don't. Either you're reliable and can be trusted to do the right thing, or you can't.

Jesus wasn't interested in having half-hearted followers. If you're not willing to absolutely surrender your entire life over to doing what Jesus wants, proclaiming his Kingdom, and giving up everything for him, Jesus doesn't want you to sign up.

That's harsh, and the opposite of what Churches preach today, but it's true! When Jesus had large crowds following him, he didn't try to keep people from leaving – in fact, he did the opposite:

"Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and he turned and said to them, 'If anyone comes to me but does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters – or even his own life – he cannot be my follower. Whoever does not carry his own cross and follow me cannot be my follower.'<sup>1</sup>

After saying this, Jesus went on to tell those people that they needed to count the cost of following him before they tried to join. He said that if you want to build a tower, you don't just start building; first you make sure you have everything you need to finish the job, otherwise you don't even try to start. Or, if a king is going to war, first he makes sure he has what it takes to win the war, otherwise he doesn't fight in the first place. Then Jesus said, "In the same way, you must give up everything you have to be my follower. Salt is good, but if it loses its salty taste, you cannot make it salty again. It is no good for the soil or for the manure pile; it is thrown away."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this section, Jesus told us to recognize what it's going to cost to follow him. He said if you're not ready, don't sign up. If you're not

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:25-27

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:33-35

willing to accept the cost, then don't try to follow him in the first place. If you're going to be halfhearted when you follow him, then he would say the same thing he said to the man who prioritized his family: Don't bother. If you're going to keep looking back, you're of no use in his Kingdom.

He said you must give up everything you have to be his follower. If you become the salt of the earth but you lose your salty taste because you weren't ready for the extreme cost, Jesus said you're good for nothing – not even a pile of manure. He literally said if you're not willing to accept the cost, and you try to follow him anyway, you're not even good for a pile of animal crap. That's how serious Jesus is about this.

With Jesus, you're either all in or you're all out. There's no such thing as a half-hearted or distracted follower of Jesus.

As we've talked about in earlier chapters, the word in Greek that's translated *faith* actually means *faith and faithfulness* at the same time. It means *fidelity*. It means *loyalty*. It means *reliability*. Jesus was saying you can't be divided. You must have absolute fidelity to him. You can't be half-hearted. If you're not willing to absolutely surrender your entire life over to doing what Jesus wants, then don't sign up. Count the cost. Look at what it's going to cost you before you agree to join, otherwise you might not have what it takes and you won't be of any use to him.

So, back to the beginning of the section we were just looking at. When Jesus said to count the cost, he said, "If anyone comes to me but does not hate his father, mother, wife, children, brothers, or sisters – or even his own life – he cannot be my follower."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus obviously didn't want us actually hating people, but he also obviously was not worried about people getting offended and leaving. He also obviously didn't want us to "focus on the family" and have family be our ministry. He wants us so absurdly over-the-top in love with him that it seems like we don't care about anything or anyone else in comparison to how obsessed we are with him!

What does it mean to be this obsessed with Jesus? Most Christians seem to think it means having strong feelings, strong emotions, singing songs, and crying. But that's not what Jesus said.

He said being obsessed with him means we're doing things with our lives that make it look like we hate our families. Therefore, family is clearly not supposed to be the focus. Your ministry is clearly not supposed to be your family. Being obsessed with Jesus means we're doing things that not only make it look like we hate our families, but it makes it look like we hate even our own lives. And if we're not this obsessed with Jesus and sold-out for him, he said

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:26

we can't even be his follower. That's the cost Jesus was talking about. That's the cost he wants us to consider before we sign up. That's what it means to really follow Jesus. That's what it means to really love Jesus.

After all, as we've already seen in this book, Jesus said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands."<sup>1</sup> "Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me..."<sup>2</sup> "If people love me, they will obey my teaching."<sup>3</sup> And John said, "Loving God means obeying his commands."<sup>4</sup>

Loving God and being obsessed with Jesus isn't about strong, emotional feelings. As we've been talking about in this book, it's about your priorities. Your actions speak louder than words. Your actions show what you truly love most. What is most important to you? What are you building your life around?

Jesus said it shouldn't be family.

Christians today build their lives around their families, and they think they're obeying God. They say the Christian life should be focused on the family, and they think this idea comes from the Bible.

But here's the reality: Jesus talked a lot about family,<sup>5</sup> and every single time, he said the opposite of what the Church says today. He never said to focus on the family. He never said your ministry can be your family. He never said to stay close to family. He never said to center your life on your family.

He said he's going to divide families. He said you're going to have to leave your family. He said your family cannot be your priority. He said it's going to look like you hate them.

So, then the question is, why?

If we're called to love others, why does Jesus want to divide families and separate families?

Christians know Jesus told us to love others – that's exactly why they think it's important for us to focus on our families and have strong families that are built on love. So why did Jesus say the opposite? He explained:

"If you love only the people who love you, you will get no reward. Even the tax collectors do that. And if you are nice only to your friends, you are no better than other people. Even the Gentiles are nice to their friends. Therefore you must be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."<sup>6</sup>

"If you love only the people who love you, what praise should you get?"

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:15

<sup>2</sup> John 14:21

<sup>3</sup> John 14:23

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 5:3

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:22, 5:46-48, 8:21-22, 10:34-39, 12:48-50; Mark 3:31-35, 10:29-30; Luke 6:32-36, 8:19-21, 9:59-62, 12:49-53, 14:12-14, 14:25-27, 18:29-30

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 5:46-48



Even sinners love the people who love them. If you do good only to those who do good to you, what praise should you get? Even sinners do that!”<sup>1</sup>

“When you give a lunch or a dinner, don’t invite only your friends, your family, your other relatives, and your rich neighbors. At another time they will invite you to eat with them, and you will be repaid. Instead, when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they have nothing and cannot pay you back. But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”<sup>2</sup>

This was his point: Yes, he commanded us to love. But he did not just command us to love our families, our friends, and everyone who will love us back. Why? Because that’s what people do naturally. That’s what unbelievers do. That’s what sinners do. That doesn’t make us different. That doesn’t make us holy.

He said we must be perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect. Or – as God said to Israel in the Old Testament, we must be holy because God is holy.<sup>3</sup> He doesn’t want us to look like all the unbelievers around us. He wants us to be different. And when he commanded us to love, he wanted that love to be different than theirs, too. They love their friends. They love their families. They love those who love them back.

If we only do the same, we’re no different. He commanded us to love with a different kind of love – a love where we love like he loves. His command to us was, “I give you a new command: Love one another. You must love one another as I have loved you.”<sup>4</sup> “This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you.”<sup>5</sup>

We’re commanded to love as he has loved us. That means our love for others should look just like his love for us. Our love should imitate his love. If we’re imitating him, our focus won’t be on our families and on those who love us back – because his love wasn’t focused on those who loved him back. We were his enemies when he loved us.

This is why Christianity is available to us as Gentiles. Paul explained:

“Remember that you are Gentiles in the flesh... Remember that in the past you were without Christ. You were not citizens of Israel, and you were strangers to the covenants of promise. You had no hope, and you did not know God. But now in Christ Jesus, you who were far away from God are brought near through the blood of Christ. Christ himself is our peace. He made both Jews and Gentiles one people, and broke down the wall of hate that

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:32-33

<sup>2</sup> Luke 14:12-14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Leviticus 11:45, 19:2, 20:26

<sup>4</sup> John 13:34

<sup>5</sup> John 15:12

divided them by giving his own body... His purpose was to make the two groups of people become one new people in him and in this way make peace. It was also Christ's purpose to end the hatred between the two groups, to make them into one body, and to bring them back to God. Christ did all this with his death on the cross... Now you Gentiles are not foreigners or strangers any longer, but are citizens together with God's holy people. You belong to God's family... And in Christ you, too, are being built together with the Jews into a place where God lives through the Spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Those of us who were Gentiles... we weren't part of Israel. We didn't have hope. We didn't know God. We were his enemies. But through Jesus, we were brought in. We're no longer foreigners. We're citizens. We belong to his family. We receive his Spirit.

Jesus' love wasn't just that he looked out for his family, loved his family and his friends, and made sure that their needs were met. No, his love was different. He loved his enemies. He loved those who were outside his family. He loved those who hated him.

The same is true for those who are Jewish according to the flesh. God said to the Israelites, "You are not my people, and I am not your God."<sup>2</sup>

Even the Israelites were not God's people. The writings of the prophets were filled with messages from God, telling them that they had committed adultery against God. They had left him. They had abandoned him, and therefore, they were not his people. He wasn't their God; they weren't in his family. Paul wrote about the Jews, "It is not that God failed to keep his promise to them. But only some of the people of Israel are truly God's people, and only some of Abraham's descendants are truly children of Abraham."<sup>3</sup>

And Jesus said to the Jews, "If you were really Abraham's children, you would do the things Abraham did... If God were really your Father, you would love me, because I came from God and now I am here... You belong to your father the devil, and you want to do what he wants... The person who belongs to God obeys the words of God. But you don't obey, because you don't belong to God."<sup>4</sup>

So, neither the Jews nor the Gentiles were part of God's family. The only people who belong to God are those who obey God. Not even the Jews who thought they were part of God's family were obeying him, therefore they were not part of his family either.

So, everyone – whether Jew or Gentile – had made themselves God's enemies. They weren't part of his family. They hated God. They rebelled

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 2:11-22

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 1:9

<sup>3</sup> Romans 9:6-7

<sup>4</sup> John 8:39-47

against God. God told them, “You are not my people!”

Here’s the point: Jesus didn’t only love those who loved him back.

His love that we’re supposed to emulate wasn’t about loving his friends and his family. He loved us while we were his enemies. His radical, extreme, and costly love was directed to those outside of his family. He didn’t “focus on the family.” And his family wasn’t his ministry. He focused on those outside of his family – the poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the helpless, the sick, and the slaves. We were poor, and he was rich, so he made himself poor so that we could become rich.<sup>1</sup> We were hungry, and he gave his body so we could eat; we were thirsty, and he poured out his own blood so we could drink.<sup>2</sup> We were strangers, and he welcomed us into his home and made us part of his family.<sup>3</sup> We were sick, and by his wounds he healed us.<sup>4</sup> We were prisoners and slaves of sin, and he paid our ransom with his own life.<sup>5</sup>

His command to us was that we go and do the same.

So, Christians aren’t called to build their lives around their families. They aren’t called to love those who love them back. They aren’t called to focus on the family. Christians are called to love complete strangers the same way that most people only love their families. More than that, Christians are called to love complete strangers with a radical love that most people wouldn’t even show towards their own families.

God wants people who prioritize what he prioritizes. He wants people who love with his love. He wants people who give everything to the Kingdom without holding anything back – even if it costs them everything that’s important to them. As Jesus said, “...you must give up everything you have to be my follower.”<sup>6</sup>

Family is not the exception.

As Christians, we know we’re saved by having the same kind of faith that Abraham had. But as we’ve been talking about throughout this book, if Abraham hadn’t obeyed God, we wouldn’t be saying that Abraham had faith. His obedience was part of his faith. If we’re supposed to have the same kind of faith Abraham had, then we should have the same kind of obedience Abraham had.

So, let me ask you: What was the first command God gave Abraham?  
“Leave your country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Ephesians 2:11-22

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; John 8:31-36; Romans 6-8

<sup>6</sup> Luke 14:33

the land I will show you.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was not the first one to say that following God meant leaving your family. God always said that his Kingdom is a higher priority than family.<sup>2</sup> And as the writer of Hebrews summarized, “It was by faith Abraham obeyed God’s call to go to another place God promised to give him. He left his own country, not knowing where he was going. It was by faith that he lived like a foreigner in the Promised Land... Abraham was waiting for the city that has real foundations – the city planned and built by God... They recognized that they were like foreigners and visitors on earth. When people say such things, they show they are looking for a country that will be their own. If they had been thinking about the country they had left, they could have gone back. But they were waiting for a better country – a heavenly one. So God is not ashamed to be called their God, because he has prepared a city for them.”<sup>3</sup>

If Abraham had said, “My family is my ministry; I need to focus on my family,” then no one would talk about the faith of Abraham. We would be talking about how he didn’t have faith. God told Abraham to leave his family. And he obeyed. As Hebrews explained, that obedience was part of his faith. It showed that he prioritized the Kingdom of God instead of his family. If he had prioritized his family and the country he had left, he could have gone back. He could have returned to them. His faith was demonstrated in that he prioritized God’s Kingdom rather than his own family.

Jesus calls us to do the same. He wants us to be different. He wants us to be holy. He wants us to be people who live in this world like we’re foreigners. We’re just visiting. This isn’t where we belong, so we’re not focused on the things of this world.

Like Abraham recognized that he was a visitor on this earth, we need to recognize that we don’t belong to this world. We don’t belong to this world any more than Jesus belonged to this world. When Jesus prayed for us, he said, “...they don’t belong to the world, just as I don’t belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world but to protect them from the Evil One. They don’t belong to the world, just as I don’t belong to the world. *Make them holy by your truth; your teaching is truth.*”<sup>4</sup>

We don’t belong to this world. Jesus doesn’t belong to this world. We are made holy – different – through the truth. God’s teaching is truth. We’re not made holy through hearing his teaching. We’re made holy through *doing* his teaching.

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 12:1

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Exodus 32:22-29; Leviticus 10:1-7; Deuteronomy 13:6-11, 33:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16

<sup>4</sup> John 17:14-17, (EXB; italics NLT)

each other.”<sup>1</sup>

We are made different than the world by living in love – the kind of love Jesus showed for us. It separates us. It makes us different. It makes us stand out. It makes us shine.

Jesus said, “All people will know that you are my followers if you love one another.”<sup>2</sup>

The only way that could be true is if our love is different than everyone else’s. If our love looks the same as everyone else’s love, then no one is going to know we are his followers simply by seeing our love. Our love must be different. It must make us stand out. It must be radical. Our love comes from having different priorities than everyone else in the world. Our love is different because there’s something more important to us than our friends, our family, or our own lives.

If we are born again – children of God, living by the Spirit – then we should have the same priorities God has.

So many Christians get this wrong. If they’re not focused on their kids, they’re focused on their marriage. How many times have you read a Christian book on marriage? How many times have you listened to a sermon on marriage? How many times have you heard Christian marriage counseling? How many times have you talked to married Christian couples about marriage?

Christians are almost always saying you have to focus on your marriage. They say you need to build a strong marriage. Christians think they need to spend time settling into marriage before they can really do anything else. Christian marriage advice almost always says stuff like: Spend time together, go on dates, get to know each other, focus on what the other person wants. I’ve heard many Christians say things like, “we’re focusing on our marriage right now.”

Is this biblical?

Sure, husbands and wives should spend time together, talk to each other, and get to know each other. Paul said husbands should love their wives, and wives should love their husbands.<sup>3</sup> But Paul also gave another piece of marriage advice:

“Brothers and sisters, this is what I mean: The time is short. So starting now, those who have wives should live as if they had no wives.”<sup>4</sup>

How often do you hear that verse brought up in a book on marriage, at a marriage conference, or in marriage counseling? Paul’s marriage advice was, “don’t live like you’re married.”

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>2</sup> John 13:35

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Ephesians 5:22-33; Colossians 3:18-19

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:29

What was he talking about?!

Well, he explained what he was saying:

“I want you to be free from concern. A man who is not married is concerned with the Lord’s work, trying to please the Lord. But a man who is married is concerned with things of the world, trying to please his wife. He must think about two things – pleasing his wife and pleasing the Lord. A woman who is not married or a betrothed woman is concerned with the Lord’s work. She wants to be holy in body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned with things of the world, as to how she can please her husband. I am saying this to help you, not to limit you. But I want you to live in the right way, to give yourselves fully to the Lord without distraction.”<sup>1</sup>

So, he was saying people who are married should live as if they’re not married because people who are not married aren’t distracted – they’re focused on the Lord’s work – the Kingdom of God. But people who are married get distracted with each other – they start thinking about how to please one another.

In other words, he was saying that trying to build a strong marriage and focus on your marriage is a distraction. His exact words were, “concerned with the things of the world.” Christians tend to think that “the things of the world” are just material things. We shouldn’t be distracted with material things. And it is true that we shouldn’t be distracted with material things – we talked about that in an earlier chapter. But here Paul said that if we’re focused on trying to please our spouse, then we’re distracted with the things of the world. Why? Because the “things of the world” are all the things that pertain to this world, and this life and are not about the Kingdom of God. It’s not just material possessions – it’s everything.

So many Christians think they have to focus on their marriage because their marriage is struggling – they’re fighting, they’re arguing, and they’re unhappy. The Church comes along and tells them to spend time focusing on their marriage and spend time with each other to solve those problems. Quite frankly, it’s no different than the marriage advice you’d get from an unbeliever.

But it doesn’t solve the problem. It makes it worse. James said that we fight and argue because of our own selfish desires – we want things, and we don’t have them.<sup>2</sup> His very next point was what we talked about earlier – if you want things for your own pleasure, you’re an adulterer: You hate God. You’re his enemy. You’re not giving yourself to God alone.<sup>3</sup>

So, if our marriages are struggling – if we’re fighting, we’re arguing,

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

<sup>2</sup> Ref. James 4:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Ref. James 4:4-10

and we're unhappy – what's the real problem? And what's the real solution? James said the real problem is that you want things for yourself. You're thinking about yourself. You're thinking about what's good for you rather than thinking about the Kingdom of God and what's good for others. Therefore, you're committing adultery against God. You're not keeping fidelity with God.

So, is the solution, "Spend time with each other and focus on yourselves?" Or is the solution, "Get your selfish desires under control and get your priorities straight – you're living for the wrong things!?" That's what James was saying. And that's what Paul was saying.

Paul was saying, "Stop trying to please each other, and instead make everything you do about pleasing the Lord without being distracted by one another! Give yourself to God alone!"<sup>1</sup> The Church's "solution" for marriage problems is the exact opposite of what the Bible says. The Bible's solution is, "Get your eyes off yourselves. Stop focusing on your marriage and how unhappy you are, and instead get your eyes on the Kingdom and live for the Kingdom without distraction."

If Christians would live that way, they wouldn't be fighting and arguing, because instead of focusing on their own selfish desires, they would be focusing on the Kingdom of God. Instead of thinking about themselves, they would be thinking about the lost, the poor, the needy, the dying, the lame, the blind, the naked, the thirsty, and the hungry. They would be thinking about what they could do to show the radical love of Jesus to others. And with both of them thinking about that, suddenly they would find themselves living as a team working together with a common purpose.

If your focus is on having a happy marriage, you'll never have a happy marriage, because your focus will be on pleasing one another instead of pleasing God!

The only important thing is the Kingdom of God. It is the priority. It is what comes first – not your marriage. Jesus told a parable about a king who threw a feast and invited a ton of people to come to the feast.<sup>2</sup> But one by one, they made excuses. One of those excuses was, "We just got married. We can't come." He ended the parable by saying that none of those people who made excuses will ever taste his banquet.

Jesus won't accept your marriage as an excuse. If you focus on your marriage instead of the Kingdom, you are distracted. You are divided. You don't have loyalty. You don't have fidelity. And that means you don't have faith. And if you don't have faith, you won't find yourself participating in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. James 4:5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Luke 14:16-24

marriage supper of the Lamb.<sup>1</sup> That’s what Jesus was saying in that parable.

For those of you who are single, the same concept applies to you. Is marriage your goal? Is it what you dream about? Is it what you’re working toward? If so, then your priorities are wrong. The Kingdom of God isn’t your goal. It’s not what you want most, and it’s not what you’re working toward. You have a higher priority – something you love more than God!

Paul told singles, “If you are not married, do not try to find a wife.”<sup>2</sup>

He was not saying it’s a sin to get married. But he was saying you can’t live for marriage. He was saying the same thing he said to married people – you need to live for the Kingdom without distraction.

Nearly every unbeliever in the world is looking for romance. They’re looking for that special someone who they’re hoping will make them happy. They’re looking for intimacy. They’re looking for companionship. They’re looking for some kind of relationship. Christian singles today, in general, are no different.

I know I was no different. I wanted to get married more than anything else. I often made plans with friends simply because I wanted to be around that one particular girl I liked. I did everything I could to get some kind of romantic relationship. I was no different than the world. I wasn’t set apart for God. I wasn’t holy. I thought I was honoring God because I was “saving myself for marriage.” But I wasn’t honoring God. I was rebelling against him and abandoning him as I threw myself into a pursuit to find happiness in someone other than him.

I thought I loved God, but I hated him. I thought I loved God, but I had another master. The Kingdom of God was not my priority. Therefore, I didn’t love God. I didn’t stay holy. I became like the world.

Jesus isn’t looking for people who just don’t have sex until they’re married. That’s not what being pure is about. Christians have missed the whole point; they’ve taken verses they don’t understand, and they turn them into laws that they say people have to obey. Paul said:

*“The purpose of my instruction is that all believers would be filled with love that comes from a pure heart, a clear conscience, and genuine faith. But some people have missed this whole point. They have turned away from these things and spend their time in meaningless discussions. They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand either what they are talking about or what they so confidently assert.”<sup>3</sup>*

The purpose of everything the New Testament says is for people to have true, biblical, radical love – a love that comes from a pure heart, a clear

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Revelation 19:6-9

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 7:27

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 1:5-7 (EXB; italics NLT)



conscience, and a genuine faith. That genuine faith is genuine fidelity – an undistracted, undivided heart.

The point is that you're supposed to live a life of radical love where you prioritize others above yourself and you're completely undistracted by the things of this world – including romantic relationships.

It's not about law, it's about fidelity. It's about loyalty. It's about reliability. It's about not getting distracted by this life. Jesus wants people who give up everything for him. Jesus is looking for people who completely stop living for this world and this life. He wants people who have died to this life and no longer live for themselves but live for him.<sup>1</sup> He wants people who are undivided, undistracted. Being different is about not being like the world. Being holy is about offering our entire lives as a sacrifice to God. It's about living like we're just visiting this earth. It's about living like aliens.

As long as we keep getting distracted by anything in this short, temporary life, we're no different.

Paul said, "A soldier wants to please the commanding officer, so no one serving in the army wastes time with everyday matters."<sup>2</sup>

It doesn't matter what those everyday matters are. If your focus is not on pleasing your commanding officer, you're not following him. Paul also wrote about how everything that had once been important to him was then worth nothing to him.<sup>3</sup> He said he considered it the same as worthless trash. He said the only important thing to him was living for Jesus, becoming like him, and knowing him. He told the Philippians to imitate him in this and think this way too.<sup>4</sup> But then he contrasted that to those who don't adopt this way of thinking:

"Many people live like enemies of the cross of Christ. I have often told you about them, and it makes me cry to tell you about them now. In the end, they will be destroyed. They do whatever their bodies want, they are proud of their shameful acts, and they think only about earthly things."<sup>5</sup>

Do you live as an enemy of the cross of Christ? Or do you live as someone who is completely devoted to the Kingdom of God without distraction? Do you do whatever your body wants? Do you realize that that includes making marriage your priority, even if you save yourself for marriage? If you want to get married, and your actions show that this is your priority, you're still doing whatever your body wants, even if you do in fact wait until marriage. That's not God's standard of purity. God's standard of purity is

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 2:4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Philippians 3:3-11

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Philippians 3:15

<sup>5</sup> Philippians 3:18-19

when all you care about is him and his Kingdom and obeying his commands to prioritize the needs of others. Prioritizing marriage and prioritizing your own family is not what God wants. It's what your body wants.

Are you proud of your shameful acts? Shameful acts include only thinking about relationships, only thinking about having a girlfriend or a boyfriend, or only thinking about getting married. Are you thinking only about earthly things? Earthly things include relationships. Earthly things include family. Earthly things include marriage.

Only one thing is important.

“To me the only important thing about living is Christ...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 1:21

# Chapter 16

## Lies Christians Believe About Their Calling

As we've been discussing, Christians are called to live holy lives – lives that are all about the Kingdom of God without distraction. I want to talk for a bit about what that practically means.

When we look at the average Christian life in America, most Christians go through life doing their own thing, and the Kingdom of God gets kind of tacked on to the side – they do things for the Kingdom, but primarily they focus on their education, their jobs, their income, their families, their retirement, and other such things. We've been discussing how this needs to be reversed. The Kingdom of God needs to be the priority.

However, there is one final issue we need to address – we need to make sure that what we're doing for the Kingdom is what God wants us doing for the Kingdom. That's what we're going to talk about in this chapter.

When I was growing up in the Church, I often thought I was doing things for the Lord and living for the Kingdom when I actually wasn't. Why? Because I thought that living for the Lord meant that I could just pick whatever I wanted to do, and do it for him.

People in my church often quoted this verse:

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”<sup>1</sup>

We took this verse and built our lives around it. The problem was, we didn't understand it. We took this verse to mean, “Go do whatever you're doing, but when you do it, do it for God's glory.”

An example of this mindset is when you're watching a football game and you see one of the football players score a touchdown, get down on one knee, bow his head, and point his finger to heaven. We all see that and think, “Wow, that guy is giving glory to God!”

That football player has built his life around a sport. He built his life around what he wants, what he enjoys, and what he loves to do. But when he does it, he makes sure everyone sees him giving the glory to God. And we think that's what this verse means; we think that's what Paul was talking about.

Essentially, Christians typically think that you can do whatever you

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV)

want to do (as long as it's not outright sin), but you need to figure out how to do that thing in a way that gives God the glory.

That's not what Paul was saying. That's actually the exact opposite of what Paul was saying.

This verse doesn't stand alone. It has a point. If you miss the point of what Paul said, and build your life around what that one individual verse seems to say by itself, then you're doing exactly what Paul warned us about when he said that his instructions have a point – that point being to love – and he warned us that some people will miss the whole point of what he wrote.<sup>1</sup> They want to be teachers, but they don't understand what they're talking about.

The context of 1 Corinthians 10:31 began three chapters earlier. Paul's whole point in these three chapters was that we *can't* just do whatever we want! We must do what's best for others – not ourselves. When he said, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God,” he was not saying, “Do whatever you want, just make sure you do it for God's glory.” He was actually saying, “You can't do whatever you want; you have to choose to only do the things that are good for others – things that show others the love of God.”

We can see this clearly if we just look at the verses that come immediately afterwards:

*“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Never do anything that might hurt others – Jews, Greeks, or God's church – just as I, also, try to please everybody in every way. I am not trying to do what is good for me but what is good for most people so they can be saved. Imitate me, as I imitate Christ.”*<sup>2</sup>

Paul was not telling them they're free to do whatever they want to do as long as it's for God's glory. He was telling them to only do the things that are good for others – not what's good for themselves.

Essentially, he was saying, “Your lives must be built around the commands of God.” You can't just do whatever you want and think it's for the Lord. You have to do what God said to do.

So many Christians think they're seeking first the Kingdom of God because they're building their lives around doing something *for* God. But they're not doing what God told us to do. They read their Bibles, they go to church, they pray, they have Bible studies, and they do all the typical “Christian” things. They start Christian projects, they make Christian films, they write Christian music, they build Christian buildings, they organize Christian conferences, they plan Christian retreats, they run Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 1:5-7

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:31 - 11:1 (EXB; italics ESV)

businesses, they vote for Christian politicians.

Everything about their lives is defined by their “Christianity.” Yet nothing about their lives is defined by what Jesus actually told us to do.

Jesus said the ones who obey him are the ones who love him.<sup>1</sup> So do we love him if we spend our lives doing something for him, but don’t do what he told us to do?

If Jesus is your king in a war, and he tells you to go fortify the city walls because the enemy is about to attack, but instead you go and paint a mural for him – do you love him? You may have done something *for* him, but you didn’t do what he told you to do. You didn’t do what was best for him. You did what was best for yourself – what you wanted to do. That’s not love.

As Christians, our lives must be defined by doing the things Jesus told us to do. John said, “We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”<sup>2</sup>

He said again, “The people who obey God’s commands abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>3</sup> And again, “Loving God means obeying his commands.”<sup>4</sup>

According to John, if you say you know God, but you’re not obeying his commands, you’re a liar. The truth isn’t in you. It doesn’t matter if you think you know God, or if you think you’re doing things for God. If you’re not obeying what he commanded you to do, you don’t know him, you don’t abide in him, he doesn’t abide in you, and you don’t love him.

Christians have made the mistake of thinking that they’re obeying the commands of God when they do just anything Christian. They’ve made the mistake of thinking that they can do whatever they want as long as it’s for the Lord. They’ve made the mistake of thinking that anything done for God is what God wants them to be doing, that as long as they do something for God then they love God.

But that’s not what the Bible says.

For example, look at Paul’s own life. Before Paul became a Christian, he did things *for* God. He was zealous. He was passionate. He worked hard and gave it his all. He devoted himself to God. He gave his entire life over to doing things for God.

But he wasn’t doing what God said to do.

Being zealous for God doesn’t mean you’re obeying God. Caring a lot about God doesn’t mean you’re obeying him. Working hard for God and

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 14:15,21,23

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:3-4

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:24

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 5:3

doing things for God doesn't mean you're doing what he wants. It doesn't even matter if you give your entire life to doing things for God. Paul did the same thing before he was a Christian.

The Bible tells us we must be doing the things God explicitly said to do. And the Bible tells us what those things are. John didn't just tell us that we need to be obeying the commands of God, and then leave it up in the air for us to decide what that means for us. No. When John told us that we need to be obeying the commands of God, he was very clear what those commands are. It's not subjective. And it's not different for each person. It's the same for everyone, and it's defined by Scripture.

John said, "Anyone who claims, 'I am in the light,' but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light..."<sup>1</sup>

"This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other."<sup>2</sup>

"This is what God commands: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded."<sup>3</sup>

"Dear friends, we should love each other, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has become God's child and knows God."<sup>4</sup>

"...if we love each other, God abides in us, and his love is made perfect in us."<sup>5</sup>

"Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."<sup>6</sup>

"If people say, 'I love God,' but hate their brothers or sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen. And God gave us this command: Those who love God must also love their brothers and sisters."<sup>7</sup>

"...this is not a new command I am writing but is the same command we have had from the beginning. I ask you that we all love each other. And love means living the way God commanded us to live. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is this: Live a life of love."<sup>8</sup>

Obeying the commands of God is about living a life of love. John was very clear about that. And throughout this book, we've seen many other places

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:9-10

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:23

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:7

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:12

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:16

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 4:20-21

<sup>8</sup> 2 John 5-6

in Scripture where Jesus and the other apostles all taught the exact same thing.<sup>1</sup>

But, as we've also seen throughout this series, the Bible defines love. John himself defined love right there in the context of all these other verses. He didn't leave anything up to your own imagination. We can't just bring our own definition. John was clear: loving God, knowing God, living in the light, and being a Christian in the first place means we obey God's commands, and his commands are to love one another, and this is what real love is. John said:

“This is how we know what real love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. So we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Suppose someone has the world's possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but does not help. Then God's love is not living in that person. My children, we should love people not only with words and talk, but by showing true love through our actions.”<sup>2</sup>

He said again, “This is how God showed his love to us: He sent his one and only Son into the world so that we could have life through him. This is what real love is: It is not our love for God; it is ‘love for us. He sent his Son as the propitiation for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way we also should love each other.”<sup>3</sup>

We know what real love is because we can see it: Jesus laid down his life for us. That's real love. Real love is what God showed toward us. Real love is not the world's love. Real love is laying down your life for others. Real love is what Jesus did. Real love is what God did by sending his only Son to die to rescue us. Real love gives up everything to help others. And if we don't live that way, God's love doesn't live in us, because if we don't live that way, we show by our actions that we don't have real love. Jesus said, “Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me... If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus said this, he was talking about love. Real love. He was talking about the radical kind of love that lays down everything in order to help others – in order to meet their needs. The kind of love where you prioritize other people and you completely stop thinking about yourself. You stop looking out for your own needs, you stop looking out for what's comfortable for you, and you prioritize the needs of other people: What do they need? What is best for them?

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:38-48, 7:12, 9:10-13, 12:7, 20:25-28, 22:37-40, 25:31-46; Mark 10:42-45, 12:28-34; Luke 6:27-36, 10:25-37, 12:42-44, 14:12-14; John 13:3-5; 13:14-17, 13:34-35, 15:12, 15:17; Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35, 20:33-35; Romans 12:9-21, 13:8-10, 14:15-18, 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13, 9:1-22, 10:23-11:1, 12:1-14:40, 16:14; 2 Corinthians 8:8-9, 13:11; Galatians 5:6, 5:13-15, 6:2, 6:7-10; Ephesians 3:17, 4:1-3, 4:15, 4:28-32, 5:1-2, 5:21; Philippians 1:9, 2:1-8, 4:5; Colossians 1:3-5, 2:1-3, 3:12-17; etc

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 4:9-11

<sup>4</sup> John 14:21, 23

Christians need to get out of this “Western Christianity” mindset where they think that they’re obeying God when they do things that have nothing to do with living in real, radical love. Real, radical love is about meeting the needs of others. Jesus defined *needs* as what you’re going to eat, what you’re going to drink, and what you’re going to wear. When he talked about the sheep and the goats, he talked about feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving drink to the thirsty, and welcoming people into your homes.<sup>1</sup>

Needs are about survival. Needs are about whether you live or die. Needs are about food, water, clothes, and shelter. Needs are about living a simple and humble life.

Needs do not include music, conferences, retreats, church buildings, sound systems, art, movies, businesses, or politics. Needs do not include so many of the things that Christians do – but they think that they’re obeying God when they do those things. Doing those things is not obeying the commands of God, because doing those things is not about laying down your life for the needs of others.

American and Western Christianity has accepted an American and Western lifestyle where they don’t even know the difference between needs and luxuries. Christians think they’re doing things for God when they’re actually neglecting the commands of God for the sake of their own traditions.<sup>2</sup> They’re doing things the way everyone in the Christian culture around them does things. They’re accepting a version of Christianity where *showing true radical love through laying down our lives for one another in order to meet needs* has been replaced with... pretty much anything other than that.

Christians think they’re obeying God by writing Christian music. They think they’re obeying God by planning Christian conferences. They think they’re obeying God by paying for a nice church building. They think they’re obeying God by buying instruments and equipment for a well-produced worship service. They think they’re obeying God by making Christian films. They think they’re obeying God by being active in politics. They think they’re obeying God by leading youth camps and Christian retreats. They think they’re obeying God by doing any one of a number of “Christian” projects where they’re willing to spend their time, their money, their energy, and their lives doing anything other than laying down their entire lives in order to meet the needs of others.

Here’s an example from my own life:

For many years, I had a dream about what I wanted to do with my life. I have always enjoyed a good story. I loved reading novels with gripping

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9; Mark 7:6-13



stories. I enjoyed watching movies or TV shows that had well-written plotlines. I loved playing video games with brilliant storylines. A skillfully crafted story fascinated me. It took me into another realm. It kept me on the edge of my seat. It tugged at my emotions. It made me happy. It made me sad. It made me scared. It made me surprised. The power of a good story intrigued me – and I wanted to write my own.

I wanted to tell tales of renowned heroes in far-away lands. I wanted to seize people's emotions and pull them in whatever direction pleased me as I unraveled numerous plotlines simultaneously and eventually joined them together in unexpected ways.

But, being a Christian, I wanted to do it for the Lord.

I often found myself daydreaming about a book I could write or a TV series I could direct. I spent hours thinking up new tales that would be analogies about Christianity. I created an entire series of five novels in my imagination. I always thought about it, jotting down notes, and thinking of new analogies and plot-twists. I knew I wasn't a good writer yet, so I didn't start writing those books. But I wrote short stories. I practiced. I wanted to have the skill to write my novels in a way that would captivate my audience.

And in the meantime, I dreamt up new ways to incorporate the Bible story into my books. I thought of new characters and plotlines that would parallel what I read in the Bible. After all, the Bible was the best story I'd ever read... but I knew a lot of people didn't see it that way, and I wanted to write a series of novels that showed people how incredibly well-written God's story is. I wanted people to see what I saw when I read the Bible: I wanted them to see the story – the story of a God and a rebellious people. A story of slavery and freedom. A story of life, death, and a king who chooses to sacrifice his own life in order to save those rebellious people, and his death unleashes an unstoppable power that conquers his enemy and releases his people from their slavery. My books continued to grow in my mind. I developed the characters, I mapped out the land, I created cultures and nations, I planned mysteries that wouldn't be revealed until the end of all five novels.

These books were my passion. These books were my dream. I couldn't wait to write them. I couldn't wait to tell my story. And I wanted to do it all for the Lord.

But then something happened – a plot twist in my own life story, something I didn't see coming, something I never expected...

I died.

I thought I had been a Christian for over a decade. I thought I had been living for God for many years. I thought I had been planning my life around the Kingdom. I thought I had been obeying God. But everything changed. Everything changed when I read those few simple words:

“Those who have my commands *and obey them* are the ones who love me...”<sup>1</sup>

It hit me. I don’t love Jesus if I’m not doing what he said I should be doing. So, I began to search – what does he want my life to look like?

It was a relatively quick death. It didn’t take long. I hadn’t even gotten all the way through the Gospels before my old life died. My goals died. My plans died. My dreams died. My desires died. My books died.

And I came alive.

It was so obvious: Jesus didn’t command me to tell stories. He didn’t command me to captivate audiences. He didn’t tell me to write novels. He didn’t tell me to do what I always dreamed of doing. His commands were all about love. Every one of them was about love. They were about meeting needs, prioritizing the lives of others, and making myself nothing so I can help others.

I had spent so many years building my life around something that I thought was totally acceptable simply because all the Christians around me also thought it was acceptable. I had spent my life neglecting the commands of God for the sake of human tradition. Human tradition says we’re seeking first the Kingdom when we write novels about God. Human tradition says we’re seeking first the Kingdom when we do whatever we want as long as we find ways of doing it for God.

But Jesus said, “Why do you break God’s command for the sake of your traditions? You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: ‘These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The things they teach are nothing but human rules.’”<sup>2</sup>

I had spent my life honoring God with my lips. But my heart was far from him. I had spent my life worshiping him. But it was worthless. Why? Because I spent my life breaking his commands and rejecting his word for the sake of Christian tradition. I built my life around doing what the Church said Christians should do rather than around what God said I should do.

If we think we’re seeking first the Kingdom, but we’re not doing what Jesus said to do, then we’re not seeking first the Kingdom. If we think we’re serving God, but we’re not obeying his commands, then we’re not obeying God. And John said that if we’re not obeying God, then we’re not actually Christians.

God’s commands are all about love. They’re all about helping one

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:21, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 15:3,6-9

another. They're all about putting others first and not looking out for ourselves. They're about meeting needs – actual needs – so people can live.

But Christians have made up all sorts of other ways they think they can obey God. They build their lives around doing things for the Lord that he never told them to do. And by doing that, they end up breaking the commands from God that we do actually have!

American and Western Christianity has filled itself with so-called “ministry” that God never commanded. It's nothing but human traditions. And therefore, it's not Christianity at all.

We need to start re-evaluating everything. What do we do just because that's what everyone else does? What do we do that's just American? We need to move away from modern, Western Christianity and return to early Church Christianity.

Early Church Christianity didn't have church buildings. They met in homes and fields. Their money didn't go toward a building fund or maintenance or staff. Their money went toward helping one another survive. They didn't have conferences, amazing music, instruments, fancy equipment, coffee shops, retreat centers, youth camps, or any of the other things that Christians today seem to think we need. None of that existed in early Christianity. They didn't have any of those things. They had love. They were defined by love. They were defined by radically looking out for one another rather than themselves. They were defined by having no one in need among them.

Thousands upon thousands were getting saved. Why?

Because, as Jesus put it, “All people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.”<sup>1</sup>

They kept things simple. Their resources went toward meeting needs – actual needs. Food. Water. Clothing. Shelter. That's what real Christianity is about because that's what Jesus taught.<sup>2</sup>

Very often, when confronted with some of the things Jesus said we should be doing, Christians will say, “That's not my calling.” Christians will think they're called to do something else – they think they're called to business, music, education, science, art, family, or anything else. They think that each person has a different calling, and therefore not everyone is called to do some of the things Jesus talked about.

But when the Bible talks about “callings,” it isn't saying some people are called to love others, and some people are called to do business, music, or

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<sup>1</sup> John 13:35

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:38-48, 6:19-25, 7:12, 11:5, 12:7, 19:21-24, 20:25-28, 25:31-46; Mark 10:21-25, 10:42-45; Luke 6:24-36, 10:25-37, 11:33-36, 11:41, 12:42-44, 14:12-14, 14:21, 16:19-31, 18:22-25; John 13:3-5, 13:14-17, 13:34-35, 15:12, 15:17

art. Everyone is called to do what Jesus said to do. After all, John said this is how you can know if someone knows God in the first place.<sup>1</sup> It's how you can know if someone is a Christian. Therefore, every Christian must be called to obey the same commands. Right?

God calls different people to different roles within the body – meeting different needs based on the circumstances and the ability of each person. But every person in every role is called to love one another and prioritize the needs of others above their own.

That means when you see a need, if you have the ability to help, you help. And John taught all throughout 1 John that if you don't, God's love doesn't live in you, you don't abide in God, you're still in the darkness, and you don't have eternal life.<sup>2</sup> Why? Because your calling is to obey Jesus. And Jesus commanded you to love. And the Bible says *love* is about meeting the needs of others and prioritizing them above yourself.

Your calling is to be a slave of Christ. That's what the word *Christian* means. The suffix *-ian* came from Latin, and it designated who a person belonged to as a slave. So, the word *Christian* means *slave of Christ*. Being a Christian means we're slaves. It's not slavery like we tend to think of it in modern times today – it simply means Jesus is our master, and we must do what he said. That's why the apostles referred to themselves as slaves.<sup>3</sup>

Christians often think that we have different callings because the Bible says we have different gifts. But they don't understand what *gifts* are in the Bible. They think when the Bible says we each have different gifts that it means we have different *giftings*, or, in other words, some of us are good at some things and others are good at other things.

So, they think, “Well, I'm called to be a worship leader because I'm good at playing the guitar and singing. That guy is called to make Christian films because he is good at making high-quality videos. That person has the gift of hospitality; she really likes having people over, cooking good meals, and entertaining, so she's called to host our small group meetings.”

But that's not what the word *gift* means.

The Greek word literally means you have a gift to give – or, a present. You have something to give to others. If you have a gift, it means you have something you can give. A gift is not about what you're good at. It's about what you have to contribute right then, in that moment. Paul wrote about the gift of serving, the gift of encouragement, the gift of giving, and the gift of showing mercy to others.<sup>4</sup> Do you think you're not called to serve because you

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:3-4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7, 2:9-11, 3:6-11, 3:16-18, 3:24, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:1

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Romans 12:7-8

don't have the gift of serving? Or are you not called to encourage because you don't have the gift of encouraging? Or are you not called to give because you don't have the gift of giving? Or are you not called to show mercy to others because you don't have that gift either?

Of course not!

We all know from the rest of the Bible that we're all called to serve, encourage, give, and to show mercy to others. The only question is: What is the current need, and what do I have to bring to the table? If someone needs an extra hand, and I'm there, then I have the gift of serving – it's what I can give them in that moment! If someone needs some encouragement, and I'm with them, I have the gift of encouragement. If someone needs food, clothes, water, money, or something else like that, and I have the means to help, then I have the gift of giving. And if someone needs mercy or compassion, then I have that gift to give to that person.

Here's another example:

What is the gift of hospitality? Does it mean you're good at cooking meals? Does it mean you have great social skills? Does it mean people feel comfortable around you? Does it mean you've decorated your home so it feels warm and welcoming? No. In the Bible, welcoming people into your home wasn't about having them over for dinner. It wasn't about having a hang-out and then sending them home. Hospitality was about putting a roof over their heads. It was about giving them a place to live. It was about meeting needs.

For example, Peter traveled and stayed with Simon the Tanner for "many days."<sup>1</sup> Simon the Tanner welcomed Peter into his home *for an extended stay*. Then, we see that Peter was so confident in Simon the Tanner's hospitality that, in the next chapter, Peter invited complete strangers to also come stay the night in Simon the Tanner's house.<sup>2</sup>

They had small houses back then! Peter was living in this other guy's house. Peter then also invited other people to come stay with this guy. Why? Because Simon the Tanner was a real Christian. He had the means to help, so he helped. Peter knew he could invite others to come and stay, because Peter saw Simon's love. Peter knew he was real and would never refuse to help someone in need of shelter for the night.

Simon had a gift. He had something he could give. His gift wasn't that he was good at hosting. His gift was his house. If you have a house, then you have the gift of hospitality. It's not about what you're good at. It's about what you have that you can use to help others. It's about putting others above yourself. It's about using your resources for the good of others.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 9:43

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 10:23

All our gifts and callings are about doing what Jesus taught. He taught love. He taught that we should share everything we have with one another. Your gift is merely about what you have that you can share.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to do what he taught. Period.

There are many ways this applies. My wife, Tess, used to really want to make feature-length films for the Kingdom. She had many ideas of how she could write, direct, and produce films that tell stories about God and about people who have lived their lives for God in the past. She had a business idea about how she could market Christian art, music, and film to help other Christian artists get their voices heard. She thought doing this was a way she could work for the Kingdom. She thought this was obeying the commands of Jesus.

But that all changed for her.

Because Jesus didn't call us to make movies. He didn't call us to do art, music, or film. He didn't call us to be creative and express ourselves through media. The early Church didn't make art for Jesus. They didn't get distracted with doing entertainment for the Lord. No, they transformed the face of the entire world, and they did it while only devoting themselves to what the apostles were teaching – love.

Jesus called us to love.

How much time and money are we going to pour into doing projects for the Lord that he never told us to do? All that time and money could be poured into helping other people survive – getting them food, getting them water, getting them clothes, and getting a roof over their heads. Our resources could go toward helping people live. But instead they're going toward art, media, and other projects. We're prioritizing American Christian traditions over the survival of others – and over the priorities we see in the Bible. When we choose to live our lives doing what we want to do for the Lord, rather than what he told us to do, we could easily find ourselves doing the exact opposite of what God wants.

God told us what he wants us to be doing with our resources. If we're using our resources to do something for the Lord other than what he told us to do with those resources, we're doing exactly what the Pharisees did. Earlier in this chapter, I quoted Jesus when he told the Pharisees that they were choosing human tradition over God's commands. Do you know the context – both historical and biblical – of what he was saying there?

God told the Israelites in the Law to honor their father and mother.<sup>1</sup> This is a verse that's majorly misunderstood in the Church today. We've come up with all of our own ideas about what it means rather than looking for how

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16

it was understood by the original audience. In all the ancient Jewish writings available to us, including the words of Jesus himself, it's clear what they thought it meant to *honor*. They didn't think it meant just *be respectful*. They didn't think it meant just "Say 'yes sir' or 'yes ma'am.'" They also didn't think it meant doing whatever your parents want you to do. No, they understood that God was telling them to take care of the needs of their parents in their old age. Make sure your parents have what they need.

But the Pharisees didn't do that. They told people that if you have something that could be used to help your parents, you could instead choose to give it to God in some other way. When Jesus told the Pharisees that they were breaking God's commands for the sake of their own traditions – this is what he was talking about! Here is the full context:

"Why do you break God's command for the sake of your traditions? God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Anyone who says cruel things to his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say a person can tell his father or mother, 'I have something I could use to help you, but I have given it to God already.' You teach that person not to honor his father or his mother. You rejected the word of God for the sake of your own tradition. You are hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: 'These people show honor to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is worthless. The things they teach are nothing but human rules.'"<sup>1</sup>

God had told the Israelites to honor their father and mother. In other words, God had told them to love their parents – to make sure their needs were met. But the Pharisees taught the people that they could choose to do something else for God instead. If they had something that could be used to help their parents, they could instead do something else with that thing as long as it was for God.

This is the same thing the Church does today.

Jesus gave us commands. He told us what he wants us to do. Christians today have the means to obey. They have the means to show the love of Jesus to others. They could sell their possessions and give to the poor. They could give food to the hungry. They could give water to the thirsty. They could give clothes to the naked. They could open their homes to strangers. They could share everything they own. They could give to everyone who asks.

But instead, they purchase instruments so they can play music to God. They buy cameras so they can make Christian films. They rent out giant buildings and hold massive conferences. They spend their money on equipment, sound systems, lights, projectors, and backdrops so they can put

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 15:3-9

on a concert that they call “worship.” They donate money to their church – paying for a building, maintenance, and a staff – rather than giving their money to the poor.

When Christians take resources that could be used to give food, clothing, water, or shelter to people, and they instead put it toward music, equipment, buildings, conferences, lights, retreats, or any other modern “Christian” thing, they are prioritizing those things over people’s lives. They are saying that these “Christian” things that the Early Church didn’t even do are more important than whether or not some of their brothers and sisters have their basic needs met for survival.

That’s why John called it “hating” a brother or sister.<sup>1</sup> It doesn’t mean you *think* you hate them. It simply means you don’t go out of your way, above and beyond, to make sure they have what they need to live. Hatred is when, instead, you wanted to have that nice guitar so your music sounds better, or that expensive microphone, or that personal retreat. You prioritized something trivial over their very survival.

Of course that’s hatred.

Furthermore, when Christians do this, they’re saying God also values those trivial things over the lives of his children. They think what they’re doing pleases God! They think God cares about the quality of their music, the building they meet in, or their Christian camp more than he cares about whether or not there are people in his body who are struggling to survive.

God cares about us meeting needs because that’s the only thing that is actually important. The most important thing the Early Church did was make sure that there was no one in need among them.<sup>2</sup> It was radical, and it meant everyone chose to live simpler lives for the sake of others. But they did it because it was the most important thing.

God desires mercy, not sacrifice.<sup>3</sup> Or, in modern terms, God desires complete selfless love, not a worship service.

Christians today have neglected God’s commands for the sake of their own traditions. Their traditions tell them they need all these fancy Christian things that the Early Church did just fine without. Their traditions tell them to spend their time, money, and energy doing things for God that he never commanded them to do.

As Jesus said, Christians have something they could use to help those in need, but they’ve given it to God already. Jesus called this “rejecting the word of God.” He said this is what it means to honor God with your lips, but

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9, 2:11, 3:15, 4:20

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Proverbs 21:3; Hosea 6:6; Matthew 9:10-13, 12:7



have your heart be far from him. He said this kind of worship is worthless.

Think about that.

What are you doing for the Kingdom? Are your projects, goals, donations, time, money, and energy going into the things that Jesus directly commanded us to do? Or have you found another way you want to serve God?

So many Christians waste their lives away doing something for the Lord – but Jesus would call it worthless.

A lot of times, Christians think they need amazing worship services, flashing lights, well-produced music, films, youth camps, retreats, and many other things like these because (though they would never put it in these words) they feel the need to dress God up and make him look cool. They waste their time and money trying to put together a good presentation, trying to make things look cool, or trying to be artistic. Instead of putting their money where God says to put it, they put their money into making things look better and attracting people through art, design, flashing lights, well produced music, and overall presentation.

They're so used to a dry, boring, religious Christianity that they think we're supposed to put in some effort to make God look cool and make Christianity look appealing. This is the opposite of what Paul did.

“Dear brothers and sisters, when I came to you, I did not come preaching God’s mystery with eloquent words or a show of human wisdom. I decided that while I was with you I would forget about everything except Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. So when I came to you, I was weak and fearful and trembling. My teaching and preaching were not with words of human wisdom that persuade people but with demonstrations of the Spirit and of power. This was so that your faith would be in God’s power and not in human wisdom.”<sup>1</sup>

When Paul preached, he didn't make it flashy. He didn't dress it up. He didn't try to attract people by being cool. No, he trusted in God's power and came to them in weakness. He was trembling. In his second letter to the Corinthians, he said, “Some people say, ‘Paul’s letters are powerful and sound important, but when he is with us, he is weak. And his speaking skills are deplorable.’”<sup>2</sup>

Christians today have forgotten the example of Paul. They don't imitate him as he imitated Jesus. They try to dress up Jesus. They try to make Christianity look cool. They value being artistic. They think it's something that pleases God. And they end up spending so much time and money on it.

But it's not what God wants.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 10:10

When the Lord first woke me up and got me to start taking him seriously, it was partially through the most unproduced, unprofessional, unartistic presentation I have (to this day) ever seen. There was nothing glamorous about it. There wasn't much well-done about it at all.

But it had truth. That's all it needed.

God told us where he wants our money going. He told us where he wants our time going. So, we need to prioritize what he prioritizes when we try to obey him. If we prioritize being artistic or well produced or attractive, we're not prioritizing what he said to do. And we're not believing in the power of the truth.

Jesus also didn't dress up his teaching to attract people. In fact, he said, "Those who are not offended because of me are blessed."<sup>1</sup>

Either the truth will set people free... or it will offend them. So, stop trying to dress it up. Stop wasting so much time trying to do things in a human way. God's wisdom isn't man's wisdom.<sup>2</sup> You don't have to dress it up. You don't have to have a good presentation. You don't have to look cool.

You just have to obey what you were told to do. That's it.

Tess and I try to keep our presentation simple. Early on, we had ideas of making well-produced videos and feature-length films. We dreamt of ways to make things cool and get people's attention. But the Lord showed us a better way. We want to see more Christians recognize that there's no need to dress up the truth. There's no need to make it flashy. There's no need to make it attractive. Because the truth – the real truth – isn't like the boring, religious Christianity that requires flashing lights and well-produced videos. The real truth either sets people free... or it offends them and they leave.

Real Christianity doesn't need a budget. It doesn't need equipment. It doesn't need to be polished. Real Christianity has the power of God. Real Christianity – with the real truth about what the Bible teaches about what it means to be a Christian – that truth has power, and it will set people free.

Finally, when we talk about obeying God, we need to talk about the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we receive the Holy Spirit, and we can be led by the Spirit. But a lot of Christians don't know what that means. Many Christians think they're being led by the Spirit, but they're spending their lives doing things the Spirit would never say to do.

Can we receive direction and leadership from the Spirit? Absolutely! Will the Spirit of God tell us to spend our lives doing something that is not centered around the things God said to do? No. Jesus said the Holy Spirit will

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 1:18-28, 3:18-23

remind us of everything he taught us.<sup>1</sup> He said the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, and the Spirit will lead us into all truth.<sup>2</sup> And he said “the teaching” is the truth.<sup>3</sup> And John told us plainly what “the teaching” is:

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>4</sup>

The Spirit will teach us what love is. The Spirit will remind us of what Jesus taught. The Spirit will lead us into living a life defined by love. It all comes down to love.

The Spirit will not lead us into a life defined by doing things for God that God never told us to do. The Spirit will not lead us into a life defined by human traditions rather than by the commands of God. The Spirit will lead us into living out the commands of God.

But a lot of Christians need to realize that the Spirit is not a substitute for the commands of God. John told us, “We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”<sup>5</sup>

But as we’ve already seen, John didn’t leave it there. He then went on to tell us what those commands are. This means that the commands we’re supposed to be obeying are the commands found in Scripture! John was talking about the commands in Scripture. Every true Christian will live a life defined by obeying the commands found in Scripture. No true Christian will do anything different. And the Holy Spirit will never tell us to do anything different.

Many Christians need to realize that if they’re waiting for a prophetic word to tell them to do something that the Bible already tells them to do, they’re rejecting the word of God. They’re disobeying. Jesus already told us what to do. Why do you need the Spirit to tell you again?

If a stranger knocks on your door, and you need a prophetic word to tell you whether or not to let them in, you don’t understand the Bible. If someone in need asks for help, and you’re waiting for a word from God to tell you if you should help, you don’t know God. If you’re waiting for a word from God to tell you something that the word of God already told you to do, you’re rejecting the word of God for the sake of your own traditions.

Your human traditions tell you that the Spirit is the only means of knowing God’s will. Your human traditions tell you that the Spirit is the only way to know what God wants you to do. Yet God’s word is full of his

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 14:26

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 14:16-17, 15:26, 16:13-14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 17:17

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:3-4

commands about what he wants us to be doing, and instructions concerning what he cares about. And Paul told us that the point of Scripture is to teach us righteousness – to teach us how to live, and how to make our decisions based on what God says is right.<sup>1</sup>

The Spirit will lead you into truth, yes. The Spirit will direct you when necessary to get you where you need to be to help people, yes. The Spirit will sometimes tell you where to go, yes. The Spirit will sometimes tell you who to talk to and what to say, yes. But the Spirit will not substitute the Bible. The Spirit is not a substitute for the commands of Jesus we have in Scripture. And the Spirit will never contradict the commands of Jesus we have in Scripture.

If Scripture already tells you what you should do in any particular situation, you don't need a word from God. Perhaps the Spirit will remind you of something the Bible says, yes. But perhaps the Spirit will stay quiet, because he wants you to learn, not just listen. We're supposed to learn what God wants and know his commands. The Bible tells us what we need to know. But we need to learn what it says. We need to know what it tells us our lives should look like. We need to read it cover to cover and see the full picture. We need to see the message and not just individual verses. We're supposed to grow in understanding.

The Spirit doesn't want to spoon-feed us every time. We're supposed to mature.

Remember what we saw at the beginning of this book: In Ancient Israel, during their rebellion against God, they didn't realize they were in rebellion against God. They thought they were serving God, worshiping God, and living for God. One aspect of their rebellion was that they had many, many false prophets among them.

These false prophets prophesied in the name of the Lord. It's clear from some of the stories that the false prophets themselves didn't realize that they were false prophets. They thought they were hearing God. They thought they were following God's leading. They thought they were speaking for God.

They thought they were real prophets!

The New Testament warns us that we will have false prophets in the Church, too.<sup>2</sup> We should expect it to be the same way – they won't realize they're false prophets. They'll think they're hearing God. They'll think they're following God's leading. They'll think they're speaking for God.

Jesus said that many will call him, "Lord, Lord" but he will tell them that he never knew them, and he will not allow them into Heaven.<sup>3</sup> One of the

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:16-17

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-20, 24:11, 24:24; Mark 13:22-23; 2 Peter 2:1

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

things he specifically said about those people is that they prophesied in his name. They thought they heard God's voice. They thought they followed God and obeyed him because they thought they were being led by the Spirit.

But Jesus said he never knew them. And he said why: They didn't obey his commands.

Jesus was saying there will be many people who think they're hearing the Spirit. They'll think they're doing what God wants. They'll think they're walking in the Spirit, and living in an intimate relationship with God, but in reality, they never actually knew him.

That leaves an important question:

How do you know you're not one of them?

If you decide what your life should look like, or what you should be doing primarily through the Spirit and not through Scripture, how do you know you're really hearing God? How do you know it's not some other spirit? How do you know it's not just your own ideas?

A lot of Christians are quick to say, "His sheep know his voice!"<sup>1</sup> And that's true. But Jesus also said that a lot of people are going to think they're sheep when they're actually goats.<sup>2</sup> Just because you might think you know his voice doesn't mean you actually do.

Jesus said the sheep are separated from the goats based on whether or not they fed his brothers and sisters, gave them water, gave them clothes, welcomed them into their homes, helped them in their trials, and other things like these. In other words – whether or not they obeyed his commands – the commands we have in Scripture.

This is the same thing Jesus said about those who prophesy in his name.<sup>3</sup> He said they prophesied in his name, but they didn't obey his commands.

When the Bible tells us we need to obey the commands of Jesus, it also tells us what those commands are. His sheep will know his voice because his sheep will know his commands. His sheep will obey his commands. And therefore, according to John, his sheep will abide in him, and he will abide in them.<sup>4</sup>

The promise that we will receive the Spirit is not for everyone who believes in Jesus; it's for everyone who obeys him – because only those who obey him are actually Christians; we'll get into that more in depth in a later chapter. However, the point for now is that if people aren't obeying the commands from Jesus that we have in Scripture, then they won't have the

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 10:4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:24, 3:24, 4:12, 4:16

Spirit, they won't hear his voice, and they will often think they know his voice when they've really never heard it at all.

To hear and learn his voice, you have to know and obey his word. That's the clear message in Scripture.

Look at the Old Testament as an example. The true prophets in the Old Testament preached a message that lined up with what Moses had already told the people in the Law. Both the Law and the Prophets are summed up in the same word: *love*.<sup>1</sup> Moses taught the people to love one another, and he told them that if they didn't, God would punish them and drive them into exile.<sup>2</sup> Then the prophets came. They told the people that they weren't loving one another, and that if they didn't repent, God would punish them and drive them into exile. The prophets were telling the people to do something that the Law had already told them to do. And, the prophets were warning the people about a punishment that the Law had already warned them about.

True prophecy will line up with Scripture. And Scripture tells us that we're supposed to be following the commands we have from Jesus in the Bible. Moreover, Scripture is very clear about what those particular commands are. No true prophecy is going to tell us we're called to do anything else. We will not receive a word from God that contradicts the word of God.

When Christians talk to unbelievers about God, they're often heard saying, "Truth isn't relative! There is such a thing as absolute truth!" When Christians say this, they're saying that if something is true, then it's true. It can't be true for you and not true for me. God is either real or he's not. Jesus is either who he said he is, or he's not. God can't be true for me, but not be true for you. He either exists or he doesn't. Truth is not relative.

Christians understand this concept. But when it comes to the commands of God, suddenly they think truth *is* relative! They think everyone has a different calling, everyone has a different way of obeying God, and the commands you have to obey are the commands for you, but the commands I have to obey are the commands for me.

This is not what the Bible teaches. Truth is not relative.

When the Bible says that we must obey the commands of God, it also tells us what those commands are. They are the same commands for you as they are for me. The Spirit is not going to lead you into some other commands. He will lead everyone into truth. Jesus said God's teaching is truth, and John said that "the teaching" is that we must love one another, and John told us what real love looks like practically.

Everything we need is in Scripture. The Spirit is given to us to help us.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:12, 22:37-40; Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10:26-28

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Leviticus 26:14-46; Deuteronomy 27:9-26, 28:15-68, 31:15-30

Not to replace the Bible.

On a similar note, many Christians think they know they're obeying God because they're being blessed by God. For example, someone might say, "I know I'm serving God because I've seen God support me and provide in miraculous ways. I've seen doors open that shouldn't have opened. I've seen crazy things happen that prove God is for me, and that he backs what I'm doing!" People think miracles prove they're doing something that pleases God. They think it means they have God's support. They think it proves that what they're doing is what God wants.

But that's not true.

Saying, "I know I'm serving God because I've seen God support me and work miracles" is the same as saying, "I know I'm a true Christian because I prophesy in Jesus' name, cast out demons in his name, and work mighty wonders in his name."<sup>1</sup> Jesus said people will do all those things, yet he will tell them that he never knew them. He also said false prophets and false Christs would come and perform miracles.<sup>2</sup> Paul said the Man of Lawlessness will perform signs and wonders.<sup>3</sup> And John said the false prophet will call down fire from heaven.<sup>4</sup>

Miracles don't mean God is on your side.

The Bible tells us how we can know if God is on our side. It gives us the correct measuring stick to use. But that measuring stick is not whether or not we see miracles. John said, "We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. Anyone who says, 'I know God,' but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person."<sup>5</sup>

We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands. That's it! That's the measuring stick we're given!

Are you doing something that seems like it's being blessed? It's going well? Does it seem like God is on your side – like things are going well and miraculously lining up in your favor? Great! But... that doesn't actually mean anything. The Bible tells us that even the wicked prosper.<sup>6</sup> When the devil tempted Jesus, he showed that he has the authority to give all of the kingdoms and splendor of the world to whoever he chooses.<sup>7</sup> The devil can bless people, too! Things lining up for you and working in your favor does not indicate, in the slightest bit, whether or not God is for you or against you.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Thessalonians 2

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Revelation 13

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:3-4

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Psalm 73:3-12

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:8-9; Luke 4:5-7

Your measuring stick is whether or not you are obeying the commands of God. That's it.

If you're building your life around doing things for the Lord, and it seems like every door miraculously opens, and everything is working out in your favor, but the things you're doing are not the commands of God we have in Scripture, then it's very possible that, if nothing changes, you will be shocked on the last day, and it will be a day of darkness for you, not light.

“Woe to you who want the day of the LORD to come. Why do you want that day to come? It will bring darkness for you, not light.”<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the day, being a Christian means we're called to love. We're called to love with the radical love of Jesus. Everything we're doing for the Kingdom should be centered on that kind of love.

We're not called to business. We're not called to science. We're not called to the arts. We're not called to story-telling. We're not called to be worship leaders. We're not called to parenting. We're not called to studying. We're not called to have conferences or Christian retreats. We're not called to have youth camps. We're not called to make films. We're not called to put on the perfect presentation.

We're called to love.

Love must be the center. Love must be the priority. Love – true biblical love – is what makes us different. It's what makes us holy. It's our true worship.<sup>2</sup> It's what should define our lives.

Seeking first the Kingdom of God means loving one another with the radical love of God. Loving the Lord our God with all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, and all our strength means obeying his commands in everything we do with our lives – and his commands are to love one another with his radical love.

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 5:18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Proverbs 21:3; Micah 6:6-8; Hosea 6:6; Romans 12:1-2



# Chapter 17

## The Narrow Road: Is It Worth It?

As Christians, we're called to be holy. We're called to be different – that's what *holy* means. We're supposed to look different than the world in our day-to-day lives. We're supposed to seek first God's Kingdom. We're supposed to prioritize his Kingdom above anything, everything, and everyone else. The Kingdom of God is the only important thing. It's what we should build our lives around.

Jesus is looking for people who care about his Kingdom. He wants people who make all their decisions in life around what is best for the Kingdom – not what's best for themselves. He wants people who he can rely on to do what he would do – who live as he lived.<sup>1</sup>

Why? Because Jesus is looking for people he can trust.

Becoming a Christian isn't just about getting to go to heaven someday and live in paradise. Jesus wants to know that he can trust us with his Kingdom – because he's looking for people to give authority to. He's looking for people to reign with him.

In Revelation, Jesus said, "Only continue in your loyalty until I come. I will give authority over the nations to everyone who overcomes and continues to be obedient to me until the end. You will rule over them with an iron rod, as when pottery is broken into pieces. This is the same authority I received from my Father."<sup>2</sup>

He said again:

"Those who overcome will sit with me on my throne in the same way that I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne."<sup>3</sup>

So, Jesus said that those who overcome – who stay loyal to him, live for him, seek first his Kingdom, and don't get swept away by the evil influence of this world – they will have authority over the nations. They will rule over countries. They will sit with him on his throne in his Kingdom.

Paul said something similar to the Corinthians: "Don't you know that God's people will judge the world? ... Don't you know that we will judge

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:6

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 2:25-28

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 3:21

angels?”<sup>1</sup>

God’s people will judge the world! God’s people will even judge angels! Heaven is going to be a real, physical place, just like this earth. His Kingdom is going to be a real, physical kingdom. He is looking for the kings, queens, governors, and leaders that he can trust in his coming Kingdom. He is looking for people he can trust to rule with justice and love. He is looking for people to sit on real, physical thrones. These are all promises for you! These are all things you could experience! God is offering so much more than many Christians realize! He is offering you a throne. He is offering you the right to rule. He is offering you authority. Your future could include kingship and power.

But your priorities could take it all away from you.

Will you be short-sighted? Will you be distracted? Will you focus on the wrong thing? Will you focus on this life and only plan for this life? Will you only look out for yourself? Jesus isn’t going to give any authority to people who look out for themselves. He wants people he can trust to do the right thing. He wants people who will rule with justice and love. He wants people who will rule with his priorities. He wants people he can trust to make the same decisions he would make.

Jesus told a parable. In the parable, a man went away to a far-away place to be made king. When he left, he called some of his servants. He gave each of them a coin and told them to invest it until he returned. Then he left. He travelled to a far-away land, where he was made king.

This is where we are in the story. Jesus gave us some instructions. Then he left. He hasn’t returned yet, but he went away to receive a kingdom. The news has already reached us – he did, in fact, receive the kingdom. We know he’s coming back. We know he will be King when he comes back. But we don’t know when he’s going to arrive. All we know right now is that he gave us some instructions – some things he wants us to do while he’s gone.

In the parable, the king eventually did return. He called his servants together, and one after another, he asked them about what they did while he was gone. The first servant told him that he had invested the coin and turned that one coin into ten coins. The king replied to him, “Excellent! You are a good servant! Since you have been faithful with small things, I will let you rule over ten of my cities.”<sup>2</sup>

The second servant came to him and told him that he invested the one coin and turned it into five coins. The king told him, “You can rule over five

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:2-3

<sup>2</sup> Luke 19:17

cities.”<sup>1</sup>

Finally, the third servant came. He hadn’t invested the coin like he had been told. He buried it in the ground. He had nothing to show. He returned the one coin to the king. The king condemned him, called him evil, and took the coin away from him.

Two of the three servants did what they were told.

What was their reward?

Jesus wasn’t just telling us some allegorical story with this parable. This is our reality. Jesus is promising that if we are found faithful when he returns, we will reign with him. If we did what he told us to do, we will rule over actual cities! He will give us authority in his Kingdom. We will sit on his throne. We will even rule over angels.

Jesus is looking for people who he can trust to reign with him in his Kingdom. That’s our reality. That’s what Jesus is promising us. Do you understand this promise?

Do you understand why it’s so worth it to live this way?

The road to life is narrow and difficult because Jesus is asking us to live in this world like people who don’t belong to this world.<sup>2</sup> He’s asking us to live this life prioritizing his Kingdom rather than prioritizing everything that everyone around us prioritizes. The narrow road is full of tests and trials because Jesus is testing whether or not we’ll prioritize his Kingdom or his enemy. Everything about this life is a test – do you care enough about his Kingdom? Can he trust you? If he puts you in charge of something in his Kingdom, will you reign with love, or will you be untrustworthy? Will you look out for the good of those under you? Or will you look out for yourself?

Jesus is looking for servants he can trust. He’s looking for reliable servants. Remember – you’re saved by faith, but in Greek, that word *faith* is actually a word that includes *faithfulness*, *loyalty*, *fidelity*, and *reliability*. Jesus wants people ruling in his Kingdom who he can trust to do the right thing.

We must do what we were told to do while the king is away. If he comes back and finds us neglecting to do the things he told us to do because we prioritized something else... we won’t reign with him. We won’t hear those wonderful words, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” If he comes back and finds that we didn’t do what we were told to do, then – at best, we will be like the person who Paul described as entering into life, but only by fire – we’ll lose everything we ever did and receive no reward.<sup>3</sup> But at worst... we’re risking that we’ll be those people Jesus described who will excitedly call him

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 19:19

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 3:12-15

“Lord!” but who he will tell, “I never knew you.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is testing us. He wants to know if we will be faithful people he can trust to reign with him in his Kingdom, or if we will be people who have all the wrong priorities. He wants people who prioritize and value the same things he values. He values making sure that those under him have their needs met. He is not like the evil kings who rule this world and lord over the people.<sup>2</sup> He is a King who prioritizes the needs of his subjects, and he wants people who do the same.

When God first created the world, he created man to rule over the world.<sup>3</sup> But man messed up. Man disobeyed the commands of God. Man became evil. Over the course of the ensuing millennia, man has become more and more wicked. The world around us is the opposite of what God wants. The world around us is the opposite of how he is going to rule his Kingdom. If we want to prove ourselves to be faithful servants, we cannot look like the world. We must be different. We must be holy. We must live in this world with God’s priorities – seeking first what God wants despite the fact that everything and everyone around us thinks it’s stupid.

Jesus wants to see if we’ll prioritize what he prioritizes. Jesus wants to see if his Kingdom will be more important to us than this world. If we value his Kingdom, he will know he can trust us with his Kingdom.

Throughout the last few chapters, we’ve talked about a few practical ways we can seek first the Kingdom in our lives. We’ve talked about our possessions, our time, our energy, our money, our education, our jobs, our goals, our families, and our ministry. But it all comes down to the same basic principle. That principle is this: The Kingdom of God, and what God wants are what determine your plans, your actions, and everything you do – whether big or small.

Living for the Kingdom of God isn’t something you do on the side. It’s something that defines every single aspect of your life. It’s radical. It must be radical. It needs to be radical because it’s what you’re living for. If you’re living for something, it will be at the center of everything you do and say. It will drive every decision and influence every conversation.

Is the Kingdom of God the most important thing in your life? Is it not just the most important, but the core of your life – the thing you’ve built your life around, and the only important factor when you make decisions? Is the Kingdom of God everything to you? Are you completely given over to the Kingdom of God? Is it the only thing you really care about? In other words:

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 20:25-28; Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:25-27

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Genesis 1:28

## DEAD CHURCH

Do you want to be a part of God's Kingdom more than you want to be a part of this world?

Your priorities will show what you want. It's not what you *say*; it's what you *do*.

If you can't honestly say that your life and all your decisions are always all about God's Kingdom, the answer is simple: Change. It's really that simple. Repentance means you stop living the way you're living, and you start doing the things you're supposed to do. It means you stop prioritizing the things you've been prioritizing, and you start prioritizing the things God prioritizes.

Jesus is offering you his Kingdom. Do you want it?

“The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so excited that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field.

Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it.”<sup>1</sup>

“Don't fear, little flock, because your Father wants to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor... your heart will be where your treasure is... Be like servants who are waiting for their master to come home... That servant will be blessed when the master comes and finds him doing his work. I tell you the truth, the master will put him in charge of everything he owns.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:32-44

# Chapter 18

## Why Does My Life Look Nothing Like the Bible?

**G**rowing up in the Church, I would often read the stories in the Bible, and think, “Why isn’t it like that today?” Look at what the Bible says life looks like when you know God:

Enoch was taken up into heaven.<sup>1</sup> Noah survived a worldwide flood.<sup>2</sup> Abraham defeated four kings, he was visited by angels, and he saw fire come from heaven and destroy entire cities.<sup>3</sup> Moses demonstrated God’s power in Egypt with ten powerful plagues, he parted the Red Sea, he gave water to the Israelites from a rock, he gave them food in the middle of a desert, and God said that he spoke to Moses face-to-face.<sup>4</sup>

Joshua parted the Jordan River, he defeated Jericho by shouting and blowing trumpets, and he commanded the sun to stand still in the sky and it obeyed him.<sup>5</sup> Gideon defeated a massive army with only three hundred men.<sup>6</sup> Samuel prophesied, and not one word he said failed to come true.<sup>7</sup> David defeated a giant, he overthrew kings, and he was rescued from death on countless occasions.<sup>8</sup>

Elijah stopped the rain for three years by praying, he called down fire from heaven, he raised the dead, and he was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire.<sup>9</sup> Elisha made an iron axe head float on water, he healed the sick, and even after he died a dead man was raised from the dead when his body simply touched Elisha’s dead body.<sup>10</sup> Isaiah saw God’s throne room.<sup>11</sup> Daniel survived a lions’ den and repeatedly interacted with angels who told him the future.<sup>12</sup> His friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego survived being thrown into a

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Genesis 5:24; Hebrews 11:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Genesis 6-9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Genesis 14, 18, 19:23-29

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Exodus 5-14, 16-17; Numbers 11

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Joshua 3-4, 6, 10:1-14

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Judges 6-7

<sup>7</sup> Ref. 1 Samuel 3-25:1, 3:19-21

<sup>8</sup> Ref. 1 Samuel 17, 18:5-7, 23:1-6, 19-20, 23:7-29, 24, 26, 30

<sup>9</sup> Ref. 1 Kings 17:1-9, 17:10-24, 18; 2 Kings 2:1-12

<sup>10</sup> Ref. 2 Kings 5:1-19, 6:1-7, 13:14-21

<sup>11</sup> Ref. Isaiah 6:1-8

<sup>12</sup> Ref. Daniel 6, 7-12

blazing furnace.<sup>1</sup>

The apostles and the early Church healed the sick,<sup>2</sup> saw thousands saved,<sup>3</sup> raised the dead,<sup>4</sup> had visions and dreams,<sup>5</sup> and were taken up into heaven itself.<sup>6</sup>

Over and over again the Bible is filled with incredible stories about how the people who know God see him work in mighty ways, defending them, empowering them, and providing for them. Then we look at the modern-day Church, and we think, “Well, we had a cool worship service today.”

Something’s wrong!

Christianity today is missing something. The power of God seen all throughout the Bible seems to be almost absent from the Church today. For many years, I saw this, and I always had the question: Why? Why do our lives look so different today? Why don’t we see God move in power like we read about in the Bible?

The life most Christians experience today is so vastly different than anything we read about in the Bible. God seems distant. He seems far away. He seems uninvolved in our lives. We sing songs to him, we say prayers, and we try to convince ourselves that we know him, but we often don’t really feel like we have a personal relationship with him.

We often go to church only because we feel like we have to or because our friends are there. We read our Bibles because we know we should. If we spend an hour reading the Bible each day, we’re kind of secretly impressed with ourselves. If we read through the entire Bible every year, we’re considered devout, because so few Christians read through the Bible at all.

When we ask for things in prayer, we try to muster up as much faith as we can. Jesus promised us that we can ask for whatever we want, and as long as we have faith, we will receive what we ask for.<sup>7</sup> Yet despite how hard we try to believe, the sick often don’t get healed, the dead don’t get raised, the lame don’t walk, and the blind don’t see. The miracles are absent, and the only prayers that seem like they get answered are the minor ones that honestly probably would have happened even if we hadn’t prayed at all.

When we read these grand promises in the Bible and then look at Christianity today, it’s really no surprise that so many people are leaving the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Daniel 3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 3, 8:5-8, 9:17-18, 9:32-35, 14:8-10, 28:7-9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 2:41, 2:47, 6:1, 9:31, 9:35, 9:42, 11:21, 11:24, 13:43, 14:1, 16:5, 17:4

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 9:36-43, 20:7-12

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 2:17, 7:54-56, 9:10-16, 10:9-20, 16:9-10

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 12:1-6

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Matthew 17:20, 21:18-22; Mark 11:22-24; Luke 17:6; John 14:12-14, 15:7, 16:23-24

I personally know many, many people who have walked away from Christianity entirely. They read the Bible, they see what the Bible says true Christianity looks like, and they're just honest – the Bible does not describe what we see in the Church today. The closest thing to “miracles” that are happening in the Church today are often easily explained with no need for a “miracle” whatsoever.

These aren't the kinds of miracles we see in the Bible! The miracles in the Bible were undeniable. They were obvious. No one could question it – even those who wanted to!<sup>1</sup> Most of the “miracles” seen today fall so far short of what the Bible describes that many people are just too honest with themselves to pretend like it's the same thing.

No one who knew God in the Bible experienced life like most Christians do today. No one in the early Church experienced Christianity like this. The Bible describes something so very different than anything most people see happening in the Church today.

So, a lot of people decide the Bible must not be true.

They leave.

Why? Why does the Bible describe something so different than what we experience? Why does the Bible promise things that don't happen? Does this mean the Bible is not true? Does this mean Christianity is all a lie?

Most Christians either give up on Christianity, or they push these questions away because they're afraid that they're doubting. They ignore these questions and they ignore the fact that their lives don't look like the Bible. They think that *faith* means being blind to facts. They think that *faith* means thinking something is true despite the fact that they can see with their own eyes that something is wrong. They think that *faith* means never asking any questions.

But as we said in an earlier chapter, that's not the right response. Peter told us to make every effort to be certain that we are called and chosen.<sup>2</sup> Peter was saying this is the most important thing, so work really hard and make every effort to make sure that you are truly walking in the light. We're not making every effort to be certain that we're called and chosen if we just ignore the fact that our lives don't look like what the Bible says Christianity should look like!

Christians are afraid to ask questions. But that's entirely irresponsible! Asking questions is not what it means to doubt. Asking questions is how you learn!

The Bible warns us that many people will be deceived – they will think they are Christians when they really are not. They will think they're following

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 9:1-34; Acts 4:14

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 1:10



Jesus, when they're not. They will think they're alive, when they're really still dead. They will call Jesus "Lord" and he will say, "I never knew you."<sup>1</sup>

They are deceived.

How do they become deceived? Because when the deceivers came, teaching a Christianity that didn't at all line up with what the Bible said, they told people not to ask any questions. They told people that asking is doubting, and the Bible says not to doubt. But when the Bible says not to doubt, in the original Greek, it doesn't say *doubt*. It says *waver*. It's saying "don't waver" or in other words, "don't go back and forth between two different things." It's not talking about what you *believe*. It's talking about your *loyalties*. It's talking about *fidelity*. It's talking about your *reliability*.

As we've been talking about throughout this book, *faith* in Ancient Greek didn't mean *faith*. It meant *fidelity*. It meant *loyalty*. It meant *believing* and *obeying* at the same time. *Faith* and *faithfulness*. It wasn't about what information you believed to be accurate, it was about who you both trusted and obeyed.

So, you're allowed to ask questions! Asking questions isn't wavering. Wavering is when you want both God and this world at the same time, and you're going back and forth and you can't decide which one you're going to live for. It's when your loyalties are divided. But asking questions is not wavering. Accusing God is wrong, but asking a question isn't wrong. Asking is simply when you want to learn. If you're asking God a question because you trust that there's an answer that you simply don't understand, you're not doubting! You're demonstrating more faith than most Christians have! Most Christians are afraid to ask because deep down they're afraid that maybe the Bible is not true.

So, ask away! Feel free to ask God questions. Ask him what's wrong. Ask him what has to change. Ask him, "Why does the Bible make promises and say that my life should look a certain way, but it doesn't, and no one I know that calls themselves a Christian has a life that looks the way the Bible says it should? Why does Christianity today lack the power of God that we read about in the Bible? Why does Christianity today seem so different?"

As it turns out... the Bible has that answer.

Not only does it have the answer, but it told us ahead of time that this would happen. The fact that Christianity today seems void of the power of God is actually proof that what the Bible says is true. When Paul described the apostasy that he said would one day fill the Church, when he was saying that the Church would fall away and the Church would live for themselves and they wouldn't be true Christians. This is what he said:

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-27, 13:19; Mark 13:5-6; Acts 20:29-31; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:1-4; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 2:18-27; Jude; Revelation 3:1-2

“Remember this! In the last days there will be terrible times, because people will love themselves, love money, brag, and be arrogant. They will say evil things against others and will not obey their parents or be grateful or be holy. They will not love others, will refuse to forgive, will gossip, and will not control themselves. They will be cruel, will not love what is good, will be traitors, and will be reckless. They will be conceited, will love pleasure instead of God...”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout this book, we’ve already talked about how this description is a description of the Church – it’s not a description of the world. Paul concluded this whole paragraph by saying “avoid these people,”<sup>2</sup> and he wrote elsewhere that whenever he told Christians to avoid certain people, he was not talking about those in the world. He was talking about those who call themselves brothers or sisters, yet live that way.<sup>3</sup> So here, when Paul gave this description and then said to avoid these people, he was saying that people who call themselves brothers and sisters will live this way. In other words, this whole description is a description of Christians.

Throughout this book, we’ve already talked about how the Church today is full of people who love themselves, they love money, they’re not holy, they don’t love others, they don’t love what is good, and they love pleasure instead of God. Their definitions of all these words are wrong; they don’t think it describes them, but it does. And, it’s the majority of Christians. It’s the majority of people who will read this book.

If we understand what the Bible says these things mean, and what God says they mean, it’s clear that this whole description Paul gave is a perfectly accurate description of the Church today – not from our perspective, but from God’s perspective. He wasn’t describing some end-times scenario that is still going to happen someday. He was describing our current reality. We tend to not see it because we tend to not recognize that things haven’t always been the way they are now. We were born into this reality, so we fail to see that Paul was describing a change that took place before we were even born. We read about the early Church, and we associate ourselves with them despite the fact that our lifestyles, our love, our holiness, and our priorities demonstrate that we’re nothing like the biblical description of the early Church. Paul’s description in this passage perfectly paints the picture of how God sees the modern Church:

Their lives are about themselves. Money is their priority. They talk bad about each other. They don’t demonstrate the radical love of Jesus taught in

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:5

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Scripture. They often don't forgive. They gossip about one another. They lack self-control. They don't love what God says is good. They love pleasure instead of God. And when Paul described this terrible state of the apostate Church, he added at the end: "...having an appearance of godliness, but will not have its power."<sup>1</sup>

The Church today lacks the power of God that we read about in the Bible because the Church today doesn't have the same relationship with God that we read about in the Bible. The Church today is apostate.

So many Christians want to see the power of God that we read about in the Bible. They want to see the Spirit move. They want to see miracles. They want to encounter God in incredible ways. They want to experience the promises in Scripture. They want to experience the life Jesus promised to those who follow him. But they don't know where to start. They don't know where to start because they don't know what's wrong. They know something's wrong, but they don't know how to fix it. They know something's wrong, but they can't figure out why! It's because their whole perspective is wrong. They read the Bible from the perspective of a modern Christian in the Western world, and not from God's perspective.

They don't recognize that it's not just the "lack of power" that's wrong. It's everything.

If Christians truly want to see this change, they need to be willing to tear everything down and build from scratch. They need to reject American Christianity. They need to reject modern Christianity and everything about it – all the comforts and all the things that modern Christianity tells us it's okay for us to have. They need to reject all the things that we've come to accept as "true Christianity" that the early Church never did, and would never have done in a million years. We need to stop giving our money to buildings and staff, and we need to give our money to the poor. We need to stop putting our money towards "projects," Christian art, Christian film, and Christian music, and we need to give our money to those who are in need. That's what the Bible teaches. We need to be willing to reject everything about modern Christianity. We need to be willing to walk away from it. We need to recognize that God says our modern Christianity is apostasy, that it is honoring him with our lips while our hearts are far from him.<sup>2</sup> If you do not do what he wants, you do not love him. That is not true Christianity.

If Christians want to see the power of God, they need to be willing to tear everything down and build from scratch.

They need to forget all the things men have taught them, and all the

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9

religious traditions of men. They need to recognize that Paul said that this lack of power is a symptom of apostasy. Therefore, it requires a fundamental change. It requires Christians to go to Scripture instead of teachers and ask God to show them everything in their lives that must change. It requires Christians to transform from “an appearance of godliness” to actual godliness.

Throughout the rest of this chapter (and coming chapters), we’re going to look at the kind of life Jesus promised. We’re going to look at what the Christian life is supposed to look like, and we’re going to look at what the Bible says we must do in order to have that kind of life.

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Jesus said, “I pray for these followers, but I am also praying for all those who will believe in me because of their message. Father, I ask that they can be one. As you are in me and I am in you, I ask that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me.”<sup>1</sup>

Notice what Jesus said here. First, he clarified that he was not just praying about his disciples. He was praying for everyone who believes in him because of the message of his disciples. That means he was praying for us.

He prayed to the Father, “As you are in me and I am in you, I ask that they can also be one in us.” That means that just like the Father is one with Jesus, and Jesus is one with the Father, Jesus prayed that we would be one with him and the Father.

Jesus was saying that we are supposed to be one with him in the same way that he is one with the Father! That’s an incredible request! Jesus wants us to be just as united with God the Father as Jesus himself is! This is why Jesus also said, “Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I say to you don’t come from me, but the Father abides in me and does his own work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or believe because of the works themselves. I tell you the truth, whoever believes in me will do the same things that I do. Those who believe will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.”<sup>2</sup>

Here, Jesus said that we can know that he is one with the Father because of all the things that Jesus did. But more than that, Jesus said that everyone who believes in him will do all the same things that he did – and even greater things! Why?

Because we are supposed to be one with him and the Father, too! We

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:20-21

<sup>2</sup> John 14:10-12

are supposed to be one with him in the same way that he is one with the Father. Our Christian lives should look like the life of Jesus – the kind of life where we are one with God, like Jesus was, and like the first Christians in the early Church were.

Jesus promised life in abundance.<sup>1</sup> Jesus promised that those who come to him will never be thirsty again.<sup>2</sup> He promised to live in us.<sup>3</sup> He promised to answer our prayers.<sup>4</sup> He promised that if we believe in him, we will do even greater things than he did. He promised that we should be one with him and the Father in the exact same way that he is one with the Father.

But most Christians don't experience this kind of life.

They are thirsty for more. Their prayers go unanswered. The power of God is absent. The clearest prophecies they hear are extremely vague. The "accurate" prophecies that seem to come true were honestly really likely to happen anyway, and anyone making an educated guess could have said the same thing. No one is walking on water. No one is feeding five thousand. No one is cursing a tree and watching it wither up. No one is raising the dead. No one's shadow is healing people. The "life in abundance" that we were promised seems to be no different than the lives of the unbelievers around us. The "Holy Spirit living in our hearts" seems to be so unnoticeable that one of the biggest questions many Christians have is whether or not they've even received the Holy Spirit. The Bible says the Holy Spirit is our guarantee that we will receive an inheritance.<sup>5</sup> Yet most Christians don't even know if they have the Holy Spirit. What kind of guarantee is that?

We're supposed to be one with God in the same way that Jesus is one with God. This isn't what Jesus' life looked like! And this isn't what anyone in the early Church experienced. Everything used to be different.

Christians need to start asking God what's wrong. Christians need to stop accepting the status quo. If Christians really want God, they need to stop accepting anything less than what they read about in the Bible. If they really want God, they should prove it by how wholeheartedly they refuse to stop searching for the truth – even if it turns their whole world upside down.

If Christians really wanted God, they would never have accepted modern Christianity in the first place – because it looks nothing like what the Bible describes.

To begin addressing this issue, we must start by addressing what most Christians think it means to have a relationship with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 10:10

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 4:10-14, 6:35, 7:37-39

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 15:4-5

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 17:20, 21:18-22; Mark 11:22-24; Luke 17:6; John 14:12-14, 15:7, 16:23-24

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 1:22, 5:5; Ephesians 1:14

Most Christians think that having a relationship with God means we read our Bibles, we pray, we talk to God and try to listen for his voice, we sing songs to him, we remember that he's near, we call him "dad," and we spend personal private time alone with God. Yet many Christians would also describe their relationship with God as feeling "dry" and "empty." Church seems boring. Being a Christian seems boring.

They go to church because they feel like they have to. They read their Bibles because they feel like they should. But really, they're looking forward to the football game after church. They're looking forward to the new movie coming out. They're looking forward to their upcoming vacation.

This relationship we have with God is supposed to be the kind of relationship where we can't get enough of God – not where we have to force ourselves to spend time with him. The hardest part of our day should be when we put down our Bibles – not when we pick them up.

Many Christians feel like their relationship with God is a chore: they read their Bibles because they have to. They go to church because they have to. They know it shouldn't feel like a chore, but it does. But they choose to do it anyway because they know it's important. They want to be close to God. They want to please God.

The problem is that Christians have come up with their own definition of what it means to have a relationship with God. It doesn't mean reading your Bible. It doesn't mean praying. It doesn't mean singing songs to him. It doesn't mean calling him "dad." It doesn't mean spending personal private times alone with him. A true relationship with God is about what you're doing with your life – not what you're doing for an hour every morning.

As Christians, we live our lives looking forward to that day when we'll hear Jesus say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."<sup>1</sup> But we think of our "Christian duties" as things like spending time with God instead of things like selling our possessions, giving to the poor, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving to everyone who asks, welcoming strangers into our homes, proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and all those other things that Jesus commanded us to do.

We've replaced the commands of God with human traditions.<sup>2</sup> We reject the commands of God, and we replace them with religious duties like reading our Bibles, going to church, and praying. We've decided that that is what God wants us to do – even though the Bible tells us what the commands of Jesus are, and they're something completely different.

What exactly are we expecting him to say "well done" for? "Well done,

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:21, 23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9

you forced yourself to spend time with me even though you really didn't want to"?

Jesus wants a real relationship with us – a healthy relationship! What other relationship in your life would you think that you love someone who you have to force yourself to spend time with against your will? You know you don't love that person! So why do we think we love God when we treat him the same way? If it's really so hard to spend time with God, then just don't. What I mean is – if it's that hard for you to simply spend time with God, then you're not gaining any rewards or treasure in heaven by forcing yourself to do it anyway.

He's not looking for people who just spend time with him. He wants people who love him. And he said, "Those who know my commands and obey them are the ones who love me..."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus isn't going to say, "Well done, you spent time with me." He's going to say, "Well done, you did what I said to do! You loved me!" The reason Christians struggle to spend time with God and be passionate about him is that they don't really love him. That's the real problem. Those who love him won't just read their Bibles, they won't just pray, they won't just sing songs to him, they won't just talk about him – they'll go do the things the Bible tells them to do – the things that God cares about. They will devote themselves to it, and it will consume every single aspect of their lives and take priority over everything. Jesus drove this point home a few sentences later by saying again, "If people love me, they will obey my teaching..."<sup>2</sup>

John reiterated this when he said, "Loving God means obeying his commands."<sup>3</sup>

Part of the problem is that Christians are reading the Bible and spending time with God for all the wrong reasons! They do it to feel good. It's all about themselves. They want a pick-me-up, so they go to a familiar passage or a Christian devotional or some other Christian book, and they read some encouraging words that make them feel better. They think they've had an encounter with God when they read something that makes them feel good... even if it doesn't at all change the way they live the rest of their lives.

But this isn't what our relationship with God is supposed to look like. Often, we end up missing what the Bible is really saying because we think it's just there to give us warm fuzzies and help us feel better about God. But there is no Scripture that was written for the purpose of giving us warm fuzzies and making us feel good!

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:21

<sup>2</sup> John 14:23

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 5:3

“All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for showing people what is wrong in their lives, for correcting faults, and for teaching how to live right. Using the Scriptures, the person who serves God will be capable, having all that is needed to do every good work.”<sup>1</sup>

We live in the world, but we’re not from this world. We’re in enemy territory during the greatest war that has ever raged in all of history – the spiritual war that has continued to rage since the beginning of time. God isn’t trying to just give us warm fuzzies! His Scripture has a purpose, and that purpose is to teach us, to show us where we’re wrong, to correct us, to instruct us in how to live right, and to equip us, making us capable of serving God by doing good works.

If we read Scripture just looking for a pick-me-up, we’re going to entirely miss what it’s actually saying. And honestly, we’ll often find ourselves believing that we can get by without it, because we won’t feel the need for a morale boost on that particular day. But this isn’t what Scripture is for. The purpose of Scripture is to teach us how we should live. Our relationship with God isn’t about reading our Bibles for the sake of reading our Bibles. It’s not about praying for the sake of prayer. It’s not about spending time with God just for a morale boost at the beginning of the day.

God wants us doing the things the Bible tells us to do. And in order to do those things, we need to know what it actually says. We need to know what the commands of God are – and we need to be doing those things.

That’s why we should read the Bible – to know what God wants us doing.

That’s why Jesus repeatedly said, “Those who know my commands and obey them are the ones who love me,” and, “If people love me, they will obey my teaching.” He didn’t say, “Those who read the Scriptures and pray are the ones who love me.” In fact, Jesus said the opposite! He said to the Pharisees, “You carefully study the Scriptures because you think they give you eternal life. They do in fact tell about me, but you do not want to come to me to have that life. I don’t need praise from people. But I know you – I know that you don’t have God’s love in you.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus said that he knew they didn’t have God’s love in them. Why? Because John said that if you don’t love with God’s radical love then God’s love doesn’t live in you.<sup>3</sup> The Pharisees did the exact same thing many Christians do today! They carefully studied the Bible because they thought it gave them life. Christians today often read the Bible because they think it gives

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

<sup>2</sup> John 5:39-42

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:16-18



them strength for the day, or because it encourages them. Christians say they need to read the Bible to “feed” themselves. But that’s not the purpose of reading the Bible. (And, as a side note, it’s taking the “man does not live on bread alone” verse completely out of its original context! The original context for that verse is in Deuteronomy.<sup>1</sup> It’s talking about how God fed the Israelites in the wilderness with manna from heaven, and it’s saying that you need to remember that you don’t live or die based on whether or not you have food – you live or die based on whether or not God keeps you alive. It’s not even talking about reading the Bible.)

In short, you don’t read the Bible to gain life; you read the Bible to learn what God wants you to do. Reading the Bible in and of itself does not give us life, strength, or food. That was never the purpose of Scripture! The purpose of Scripture is to teach us what to do! That’s why James said, “Do what God’s teaching says; when you only listen and do nothing, you are fooling yourselves. Those who hear God’s word and do nothing are like people who look at themselves in a mirror. They see their faces and then go away and quickly forget what they looked like. But blessed are those who carefully study God’s perfect law that makes people free, and they persevere in it. They do not forget what they heard, but they obey what God’s teaching says. Those who do this will be blessed.”<sup>2</sup>

If our relationship with Jesus has us trying to read our Bibles and get excited about God without actually doing the things Jesus said to do, we shouldn’t be surprised when we keep finding that we’re not really all that excited to spend time with him.

Why?

Because we don’t love him.

Reading the Bible and spending time with God is something we will *want to do naturally* when we actually love him. But if we’re not obeying him, then we know we don’t really love him. When Jesus says, “well done” to people, he’s saying, “Well done, my good and faithful servant.” But why would he say, “Well done, my good and faithful servant” to people who never actually went out and did any of the things he told us to do?

If we want to be good and faithful servants, we need to do what he asked. This shows whether or not we really love him. Because as Jesus said, the only ones who love him are the ones who obey him, and the ones who obey him are the only ones who love him. Therefore, the ones who do not obey him don’t actually love him – even if they read their Bibles, pray, call him “Lord,” go to church, sing worship songs, and do their best not to sin.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 8:1-3

<sup>2</sup> James 1:22-25

A true relationship with God is not about reading our Bibles and praying. It's not about spending time with God in the mornings. It's not about having our "devotionals." It's about obeying God in the rest of our lives. It's about doing what we read in the Bible. It's about obeying his commands.

So that's the first issue we need to address: what it means to have a relationship with God. The second issue we need to address is related. It's built on understanding what a true relationship with God looks like. The second issue we need to address is that the amazing promises in the New Testament are given to those who have a *true* relationship with God. They are not promises for just anyone who calls themselves a Christian.

At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned many people in the Bible who lived incredible lives because of their relationship with God. Many Christians today deeply want to see their own lives look like the kinds of stories we read about in Scripture. They recognize that something is wrong, but they're not sure how to fix it. They want to see the power of God. They want to hear the voice of God. They want to be led by the Spirit of God. They want to see miracles. They want the life that we see in the book of Acts.

But if we want to see the power of the Kingdom and the movement of the Spirit like we can see in the book of Acts, then we must first start by addressing all of the other differences between us and the Christians of the early Church.

Why should Christians expect to have the same power that we see in the book of Acts when they refuse to live the lifestyle that those people chose to live? Why should anyone expect to see their lives look like that when they prove through their actions that they don't even love Jesus?

Christians make this assumption that the life and power we see in the Bible is available to anyone who calls themselves a Christian. But that's not what the Bible says. The Bible says being a true Christian means we obey Jesus. It's not about what you call yourself. It's not about what you say you believe. It's not about the information you accept to be true. It's not about who you say you love. It's about what you do.

Many Christians read the amazing promises throughout the New Testament, and they just assume those promises are for them. They assume that they are in the same category as the Christians that the apostles wrote to. But if loving Jesus means obeying his commands, then are those promises really for those Christians who ignore the radical commands and lifestyle that Jesus and the apostles all taught?

Much of Christianity today looks at different promises in Scripture and ignores the fact that those promises come with a condition:

***if A, B, and C, then X, Y, and Z***

A conditional promise means that God didn't just promise, "I will do this." He promised, "If you do this, then I will do that." It has a condition attached to it (the *A, B, and C*). You are required to do something to receive that promise. Here are some examples of conditional promises:

"For if you forgive others for their sins, your Father in heaven will also forgive you. But if you don't forgive others, your Father in heaven will not forgive your sins."<sup>1</sup>

Notice the condition here: *if* you forgive others, *then* God will forgive you. But *if* you don't forgive others, *then* God will not forgive you.

Now, that one is fairly easy to spot because it's clearly framed as an "If...then..." statement. But here's another one:

"Not all those who say to me 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants."<sup>2</sup>

The condition here is: *if* you don't do what God wants, *then* you will not enter the kingdom of heaven, even if you call Jesus "Lord." But, *if* you do what God wants, *then* you will enter the kingdom of heaven.

"I tell you the truth, you must accept the kingdom of God as if you were a little child, or you will never enter it."<sup>3</sup>

The condition here is: *if* you don't accept the kingdom of God as if you were a little child, *then* you will never enter it.

"But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then you will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High God... Don't judge others, and you will not be judged. Don't condemn others, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you... The standard you use with others is the standard God will use with you."<sup>4</sup>

The conditions here are: *if* you love your enemies, do good to them and lend to them without expecting to get anything back, *then* you will have a great reward and will be a child of God. Also, *if* you don't judge others, *then* you won't be judged. *If* you don't condemn others, *then* you won't be condemned. *If* you forgive others, *then* you will be forgiven. And *if* you give to others, *then* God will give to you. God will treat you the way you treat others.

"Command those who are rich in the present age not to be proud. Tell them to hope in God, not in their uncertain riches. God richly gives us everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to be rich in doing good deeds, to be generous and ready to share. By doing that, they will be storing up a treasure

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:14-15

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:21

<sup>3</sup> Mark 10:15

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:35, 37-38

for themselves as a strong foundation for the future. Then they will be able to take hold of the life that is true life.”<sup>1</sup>

The condition here is: *if* a rich person is not proud, hopes in God, is rich in doing good deeds, and is generous and ready to share, *then* they will have treasure in heaven and *then* they will be able to take hold of true life.

These are just a few examples.

Most Christians don’t even recognize that many of the promises in the New Testament have conditions attached to them. They might think it’s an Old Testament thing – that in the Old Testament people had to do certain things to receive God’s promises. But they think that in the New Covenant, we receive all the promises with no conditions attached other than believing in Jesus.

That’s simply not true.

As of right now, I’ve counted 170 separate conditional promises in the New Testament alone. And I strongly encourage everyone to read through the New Testament and keep an eye out for them – see them for yourselves because it will give you understanding about what the Bible actually says, and you will see that these promises are not promises that are for anyone that just calls themselves a Christian and says they believe in Jesus.

Most Christians don’t even recognize that conditional promises exist for us in the New Covenant, they tend to focus on the X, Y, and Z side of the promises, or in other words, “what is God going to do for me?” But they ignore or often don’t even notice the conditional side of the promises – the A, B, and C side, or in other words, “what is God asking of me?”

Most of the time this comes from the “faith alone” idea, where they don’t understand that real faith includes action. They think they’re saved just by believing something is true. And because they think they are saved only from believing something is true, they end up re-interpreting what Scripture means when it says, “if A, B, and C.”

After all, if Scripture gave conditions to some of these promises, then those promises *aren’t* founded on belief alone – they’re founded on action. And that goes against the false doctrine they believe.

As we’ve been discussing, Jesus made it clear that those who *obey* him are the ones who truly love him. But that’s not all those verses say! Both of those verses we’ve been discussing also come with an incredible (albeit, conditional) promise:

“Those who know my commands and obey them are the ones who love me, and my Father will love those who love me. I will love them and will

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19

reveal myself to them.”<sup>1</sup>

The condition here is: *If* you know my commands and obey my commands, *then* you truly love me, and *then* my Father will love you, and I will love you, and I will reveal myself to you.

“If people love me, they will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”<sup>2</sup>

The condition here is: *If* you love me, *then* you will obey my teaching. And *if* you do, *then* my Father will love you, and we will come to you and make our home with you.

If you look at the rest of this section, it’s clear that when Jesus said, “I will reveal myself to them,” and “we will come to you and make our home with you,” he was referring to the Holy Spirit.<sup>3</sup> Essentially, Jesus was telling us that the promise of the Holy Spirit is for *real* Christians. It’s not for people who say with their lips that they love Jesus but prove through their actions that they don’t.

Jesus makes his home with us, through the Holy Spirit, *if* we obey his commands.

This shouldn’t come as a surprise. We’ve been told by the Church time and time again that once we believe in Jesus, we can have fellowship with him and draw near to God. And that is true – but as we’ve seen all throughout this book, *repentance* is when you change your actions and start obeying. *True faith* is when you believe and obey. It’s when you have loyalty. It’s when you have fidelity. It’s when you’re reliable.

That means *true Christians* are those who repent of their old life, stop living that way, and start living their life in obedience to the radical commands of Jesus. Anyone who doesn’t do that isn’t actually a Christian – even if they call themselves a Christian, even if they think they’re a Christian, and even if they call Jesus “Lord.” That’s what the entire book of 1 John taught.<sup>4</sup> Being a Christian means you obey. And Jesus only makes his home in the hearts of those who obey. Anyone else is what the Bible calls “deceived.”<sup>5</sup>

That’s why the early Church looked so different than the Church today. The early Church was marked by obedience. The early Church was full of people who died to this world and this life, and lived their lives with one goal and one priority – obeying and pleasing the Lord. They shared everything

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:21

<sup>2</sup> John 14:23

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 14:16-17, 14:26, 15:4, 15:26, 16:7-15, 17:20-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7, 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 2:15-17, 2:24-25, 2:29, 3:4-11, 3:14, 3:16-18, 3:23-24, 4:7-8, 4:9-12, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:1-3, 5:18-20

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 24:4-5, 24:11; Ephesians 5:6-7; Colossians 2:4; 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3:17; 1 John 2:26, 3:7; 2 John 7

in common, they met the needs of others, they made the Kingdom their only focus.

If Christians today want to experience the kind of life the early Church lived, they must first change the way they're living and prioritize the lifestyle that Jesus taught. This is where everything will begin to change in our relationships with Jesus. Those who love Jesus enough to actually obey him will get a real, personal relationship with God! It won't be one of just "feeling good" and "pick-me-ups." It's the kind of relationship where Jesus reveals himself to you. It's the kind of relationship where God the Father and the Son come and make their home with you and live with you, and you become one with them in the same way that Jesus is one with the Father. It's the kind of relationship we see the early Church walking out in the book of Acts and the rest of the New Testament.

This is where the extreme cost of following Jesus begins to be easy. The cost is huge when looking at it from a natural point of view. But when you realize what Jesus offers to those who accept this cost – it hardly seems like a cost at all. Jesus himself – the Son of God – the one who defeated death itself and is seated on the throne in heaven – wants to be your friend. It's not just Jesus – the Father himself will come make his home with you. Jesus also said, "In that day you will ask the Father for things in my name. I mean, I will not need to ask the Father for you. For the Father himself loves you. He loves you because you loved me and believed that I came from God."<sup>1</sup>

When we begin to actually obey Jesus and prove our love for him through our actions instead of just saying we love him, we gain a personal relationship with God himself. Our actions show whether we really love Jesus. Do we love him enough to accept the cost? This is what Jesus was talking about when he gave the following parables:

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. One day a man found the treasure, and then he hid it in the field again. He was so excited that he went and sold everything he owned to buy that field. Also, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found a very valuable pearl, he went and sold everything he had and bought it."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' commands are for us to give to the poor, help the needy, give up our excess, sell our possessions, stop loving this world, stop loving money, stop living for this life, and show his radical divine love to others through our actions. Is it any wonder then that this is exactly what the man in the parable did when he found the treasure that represents the kingdom of heaven? He went and sold his possessions. He gave up everything he had so he could get

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:26-27

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:44-46

it.

This is what Jesus was saying in this parable. The cost of following him may be great – it may cost you everything you have – but once you begin to understand what it means to have God come make his home with you, you will see the far superior value of what God offers instead of what this world offers. It becomes a no-brainer! Of course I'll sell my possessions and give to those in need! I not only get to show love toward others, but I've tasted and seen that God is good! He is so unfathomably good and worth every sacrifice and every bit of suffering.

Christians today make the mistake of thinking they already know what it's like to have God make his home with them. They think they've already experienced Jesus revealing himself to them. They think they've already tasted of the Holy Spirit. But their lives don't look anything like what we read about in the Bible. Our lives are supposed to look like what we read in the book of Acts.

Because they think they've already experienced it, they're hesitant to accept the extreme cost of obeying the commands of Jesus. First of all – they don't think they have to, because they think they're saved by believing and not by obeying. Second – they don't want to, because they think they already have that relationship with God.

They don't want God because they think they already have God.

They don't recognize that what God offers is so much more than anything they've experienced in “religious Christianity.” Everything they read about in the book of Acts is available to them. It's available to you. The relationship that Abraham had with God, that Moses had, that the prophets had, that the apostles had, that the early Church had – that relationship is available to us, through Jesus, through fidelity to Jesus and obedience to his commands, through living the life he commanded us to live because we love him.

This relationship with God is what Paul was talking about when he said, “Those things were important to me, but now I think they are worth nothing because of Christ. Not only those things, but I think that all things are worth nothing compared with the superior value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of him, I have lost all those things, and now I consider them worthless trash. This allows me to have Christ and to be united with him.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul was saying the things it cost him are worth nothing in comparison to what he gained! Jesus often listed out things it will cost us to follow him, but Paul demonstrated that those things really are worth nothing when you see what you gain by giving them up! Paul saw the value of the Kingdom of God,

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:7-9

and he went and sold everything. He gave up everything to have it. He gave it all up because he saw that everything else was worth nothing compared to the Kingdom – compared to knowing Jesus personally.

And did you notice the conditional promise hidden there in what Paul said? It's the same thing Jesus said. Paul obeyed the commands of Jesus, he gave up everything, he considered it all worthless compared to knowing Jesus – and he said that doing this allowed him to have Christ and be united with him! This is exactly what Jesus said! He taught people over and over to give up everything in order to follow him,<sup>1</sup> and he promised that if we obey him, he will come to us, make his home with us, and we will be united as one with him in the same way that he is united as one with the Father!

Paul understood the value of the kingdom of God! He understood that the benefits of Christianity are not just that we get to go to heaven someday. We gain a relationship with God right now! And Paul showed us that this was only possible for him because he gave up everything in order to get that pearl – in order to gain the Kingdom of God and be united with Jesus and the Father!

This is why he prayed for the Ephesians, saying, “I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts by faith and that your life will be rooted and grounded in love. And I pray that you and all God’s holy people will have the power to comprehend the greatness of Christ’s love – how wide and how long and how high and how deep that love is. Christ’s love is beyond comprehension, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with the fullness of God.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul prayed for the Ephesians (and for all of God’s people) that we would have Christ come and live in us – he even used the same words as Jesus – that Christ will “make his home” in your heart! It’s no surprise that he prayed that their lives would be rooted and grounded in love – that’s the command of Jesus we’re supposed to obey! This tracks right with the promise Jesus made in John 14. If our lives are rooted and grounded in love, Christ will come make his home in our hearts.

And what a tremendous promise that is! His love, his presence, his friendship is beyond comprehension! But Paul prayed that people would really know that love so they can be filled with the fullness of God. That’s another (related) conditional promise – if you want to be filled with the fullness of God, you must know the love of Christ that is beyond comprehension.

Why? Because Jesus commanded us to love others “as I have loved

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-25, 10:34-39, 16:23-26, 19:21, 19:29; Mark 8:33-38, 9:35, 10:29-31, 10:42-45; Luke 9:23-26, 9:57-62, 12:13-21, 12:32-34, 12:49-53, 13:25-35, 18:22-24, 22:25-27; John 12:24-26

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 3:17-19



you.”<sup>1</sup> If you don’t know how Jesus has loved you, then how can you obey his commands to love others with that same love? And if you’re not obeying his command, then he will not come make his home with you, and you won’t be filled with the fullness of God! Paul was saying the exact same thing Jesus said.

But, if we are rooted and grounded in love, loving one another with the same incomprehensible love that Christ showed for us, then we can be filled with the fullness of God. Think about what that means. The “fullness of God” means all of God living in us.

Just. Like. Jesus.

We can be one with God in the same way that Jesus was one with God. That’s what Jesus said,<sup>2</sup> and that’s what Paul said here. This is the kind of relationship we can have with God! He wants to talk to us! He wants to lead us! He wants intimate friendship with us! He doesn’t just want us to go to church, read our Bibles, pray, memorize Scripture, and try not to do bad things. He wants people who love him so much they drop everything – their comfort, their singleness, their marriages, their time, their money, their possessions, their careers, their relationships, their dreams, their projects, and even their lives. He wants people who are all-in like the original Church in Acts was.

And when we live this way, we get to experience him! The fullness of God. There’s no way to put a value on that. Is that not worth giving up everything for?

Jesus gave us another related conditional promise that many Christians are familiar with, but they don’t understand:

“Abide in me, and I will abide in you.”<sup>3</sup>

The conditional promise is fairly obvious: *If* you abide in Jesus, *then* he will abide in you. When we read this today, most Christians think it means, “Spend time with me, talking to me, and reading my word, and I’ll spend time with you and be with you.” So many Christians talk about how we need to abide in him, we need to build our relationship with him, we need to talk to him and spend time worshiping him. They turn it into this inward-focused thing where it’s all about me and God, me and God, me and God. But that’s not what Jesus meant! Just a few verses later, Jesus said, “...if you obey my commands, you will abide in my love.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Jesus, *if* we obey his commands, *then* we abide in his love. But is abiding “in his love” the same thing as abiding “in him”?

Yes, it is. John wrote about the concept of *abiding* quite a bit in the book of 1 John. John said, “Be sure you abide in the teaching you heard from

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 13:34, 15:12

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 17:21-23

<sup>3</sup> John 15:4

<sup>4</sup> John 15:10

the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father...”<sup>1</sup>

So, while Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I will abide in you,” John said, “If you abide in the teaching you have heard from the beginning, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.” Therefore, according to John, abiding in Jesus (the Son) means abiding in the teaching you have heard from the beginning.

If you abide in the teaching you have heard from the beginning, then you abide in Jesus. What is that teaching? John told us:

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>2</sup>

So, when Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I will abide in you,” according to John, if we want to abide in Jesus and have him abide in us, we need to obey his command to love one another. And, just in case there was still any confusion about this, John clarified a few more times:

“This is what God commands: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded. *The people who obey God’s commands abide in God, and God abides in them.*”<sup>3</sup>

“...if we love each other, God abides in us, and his love is made perfect in us.”<sup>4</sup>

“God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>5</sup>

When Jesus told us to abide in him, he wasn’t talking about just spending time in Scripture, singing worship songs, and praying. He wasn’t talking about an internal thing that’s just quietly between us and God. He wants us to live our lives for him! He wants us to give up everything for him. He wants it to be outward. He wants us focused on others.

This is how we’re *supposed* to worship him!<sup>6</sup>

Abiding in him means we obey his commands, not just that we read our Bibles and pray. When we obey his commands, we will come to really know him. This is when we will mature in him. This is when our relationship will deepen. This is when he will come make his home with us and abide in us. God becomes everything. He becomes more important to you than anything or anyone else. Once you start living for him, you will taste how good he is, and there’s no stopping what you would be willing to do for him. You become

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:24

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:23-24, emphasis added

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 4:12

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:16

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 1 Samuel 15:22-23; Proverbs 21:3; Isaiah 1:11-17; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8; Romans 12:1-2

like the man in his parable: you excitedly sell everything you have to get that pearl.<sup>1</sup>

This is the source of your ability to live seeking first the Kingdom.

God is so good. He is the one we were made for. He is the only satisfaction we can ever find. If we start living for him, we get to have him, tangibly! If we really give ourselves to him, we can experience him – not just as some feeling we get when we sing an upbeat worship song with flashing lights. That’s a temporary experience that fades when the music ends and the lights stop flashing. But the encounter with God we can have when we start living for him in everything we do – that’s an encounter that fills you up and overflows. It doesn’t fade after a couple of hours – it consumes you. It overwhelms you. It gives you that abundant life that Jesus promised!<sup>2</sup> He comes and lives in you. He abides in you. The fullness of God. All of God living in you. You can be just as united with God as Jesus was with God.

Why would you say no to that?

In the Church today, most Christians read the stories in the Bible, and they almost seem like fairy tales compared with our lives. The people in the Bible knew God personally. God was moving. God was winning their battles and defending his people. Thousands were getting saved. The dead were being raised, the sick were being healed, the lame were walking, the blind regained their sight, the deaf could hear, the mute could speak. God’s Kingdom was on full display for the world to see. Paul even went so far as to say:

“My teaching and preaching were not with words of human wisdom that persuade people, but with demonstrations of the Spirit and of power. This was so that your faith would be in God’s power and not in human wisdom.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul didn’t go around with persuasive arguments to try to convince people. He demonstrated the power of the Kingdom of God so that people would put their faith in God, and not in Paul’s arguments. But this is the exact opposite of what the Church does today. Today, countless books are written with arguments and reasons why people should believe that God exists and that the Bible is true. We have a whole sphere of Christian education called *apologetics* where Christians learn how to reason with people and convince them to believe in God. And beyond evangelism, the Church today is itself filled with people who often don’t even believe in the power of God.

The power of God is absent from the Church today.

Many Christians are hungering to see God move in incredible ways. They want to see the Spirit do amazing things. People are questioning why our

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 10:10

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:4-5

lives don't look like the Christians in the book of Acts. People are searching for the answers, changing how we format our meetings, stirring up emotions with loud music and flashing lights, strategizing about how to plan the perfect revival – and when there *is* some kind of “revival,” it consists of emotional experiences where people go to have an encounter, but it lacks real transformed lives. At the end of the “revival,” as the experience begins to fade, it becomes apparent that no lives were changed. Everyone goes back to living as normal, living as Americans, and they don't ever get to the point where they look like the book of Acts.

There's a huge movement happening today where many people are leaving the traditional institutional Church to start house churches, meet in small meetings, and have everyone participate in the meetings. Many people are hoping that this new structure will hold the answer to that question, “why do we not see God moving in power like we see in the early Church? Why do we not see the Holy Spirit doing things like we see in the Bible?” As much as I'm a huge fan of the house church movement – and it is so much closer to how things were done in the book of Acts! – it's not going to be the answer most Christians are looking for. Jesus told us what the answer is. Most Christians miss it either because it contradicts the theology that men have handed down to them, or they miss it because it's so uncomfortable they're not willing to accept it.

The early Church looked so different from the modern Church for one reason, and one reason alone: Jesus revealed himself to them, and God made his home with them. They were united with God and filled with his fullness.

The Church today doesn't have that – even though they think they do. Changing the structure of our meetings isn't going to fix this problem. Jesus didn't say, “If you meet together in homes and have everyone participate in your meetings, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you.”

He didn't say, “If you have prayer meetings and worship services and get together all the time to meet, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you.”

He didn't say, “If you put together the perfect meeting with perfectly performed music, flashing lights, and get everyone excited, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you.”

He didn't say, “If you have 24-hour prayer services, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you.”

Christians keep trying all these things because they're holding onto the false belief that Jesus said, “If you believe in me, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you.” So, they're convinced that because they believe in Jesus, they must be in the same category as the early Church.

## DEAD CHURCH

This is exactly the reason they don't understand why things look so vastly different today. Jesus didn't say any of those things. He said, "if you obey my commands, then I will reveal myself to you and come make my home with you." The one biggest difference between the modern church and the early Church can be seen in the description of the early Church in Acts:

"All the believers were in close fellowship and shared everything. They would sell their land and the things they owned and then divide the money and give it to anyone who needed it... they ate together in their homes, sharing their food with joyful and generous hearts."<sup>1</sup>

"The group of believers were one heart and mind. No one said any of their possessions was their own. In fact, everything was held in common... There were no needy people among them. Because from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and gave it to the apostles. Then the money was distributed to anyone who needed it."<sup>2</sup>

Why were they selling their possessions and giving to those in need, not living in excess, thinking more about one another than they were themselves, and making sure there were no needy people among them? Because those are the commands of Jesus! <sup>3</sup> They were obeying the commands of Jesus. And as a result, Jesus came and made his home with them. It's no wonder that when Luke wrote this description of the early Church, he included the following descriptions intermingled right in the midst of the sentences I just quoted above:

"The apostles were doing many miracles and signs, and everyone felt fear for God... Every day the Lord added those who were being saved to the group of believers."<sup>4</sup>

"With great power the apostles gave testimony that the Lord Jesus was truly raised from the dead. And great grace was on all of them."<sup>5</sup>

In the New Testament we see many stories of God's power and we see an unstoppable Church that was going out into the world and crushing the kingdom of darkness. The stories we read about them are so vastly different than what we see in the Church today for one reason, and one reason alone: they obeyed Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 2:44-46

<sup>2</sup> Acts 4:32-35

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:42, 6:19-25, 7:12, 8:20-22, 13:22, 16:23-26, 19:21-24, 22:39-40, 23:11-12, 24:45-47, 25:31-46; Mark 4:18-19, 8:33-36, 9:35-37, 10:21-25, 10:29-30, 10:42-45, 12:31-34; Luke 6:20-25, 6:27-36, 6:38, 8:14, 9:23-25, 9:48, 9:57-62, 10:25-37, 11:33-36, 11:41-42, 12:13-21, 12:22-44, 14:11, 14:12-14, 14:21, 14:25-35, 16:11-15, 16:19-31, 17:33, 18:22-24, 18:29-30, 21:1-4, 21:34, 22:25-27; John 5:28-29, 6:27, 12:24-26, 13:3-17, 13:34-35, 15:12, 15:17; Acts 20:35

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2:43, 47

<sup>5</sup> Acts 4:33

Because they obeyed Jesus, God came to them and made his home with them.

Christians today need to stop thinking that they're saved just by believing something is true. They need to stop thinking that being a Christian is just about believing the facts. They need to stop thinking that if they can just plan the perfect event then God will show up. They need to stop thinking that if they just pray more, then God will move in power. They need to stop thinking that if they meet in homes, their lives will suddenly start looking like the book of Acts. They need to stop thinking that if they continue to ignore the commands of Jesus they can still have the Spirit of God in the first place.

Christians today are so quick to have the mindset of Paul when he said, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection."<sup>1</sup> But they reject the other mindset of Paul in that same exact verse: "I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death."<sup>2</sup>

Christians want the power without the suffering. They want the power without becoming like Jesus in his death. Jesus said that if we want to follow him, we must take up our own cross and follow him to death.<sup>3</sup> We must let go of everything. We must stop living for ourselves. We must die with Jesus and rise into a new life with him.<sup>4</sup> If we want to know the power of his resurrection, we must first die. If we want to see the power of God, be united with God, and do even greater things than Jesus, then we must live the life Jesus lived.

Jesus gave up everything. He humbled himself and became a slave. He gave his life as a ransom. He came to serve. When he was here, he lived his life doing what was best for others. He was homeless – he had nowhere to lay his head.<sup>5</sup> Everything about who he was and how he lived was about what was best for others, and not what was best for himself. Following him means we do the same.

You can't have the power of Jesus without living the life of Jesus.

If the promises of Scripture don't seem to be true in your life, it's not because the Bible is wrong. It's because something is wrong with your life. Those promises in the Bible had conditions – conditions that require Christians to live like the early Church in Acts instead of like American Christians today. Those promises require true Christianity – the kind of Christianity where people truly love Jesus, so they give up everything and obey him.

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:38-39, 16:23-25; Mark 8:33-35; Luke 9:23-25, 14:25-27, 17:33; John 12:24-26

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:19-20, 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 2:11-15, 2:20-23, 3:1-4, 3:9-10; 2 Timothy 2:11; Titus 2:14

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 8:19-20; Luke 9:57-58

God makes his home, through the Spirit, with those who obey Jesus. That is what Jesus so very clearly taught. And that is why the modern Church looks nothing like the early Church. Those who do not obey the radical and costly commands of Jesus will not receive the Spirit of God.

However, if we abide in him by obeying his commands, then he will reveal himself to us, he and the Father will come make their home with us, we will be filled with the fullness of God, and God will abide in us and we will be one with Jesus and the Father in the same way that Jesus is one with the Father. Jesus said, “I will be in them and you will be in me so that they will be in perfect unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you loved them just as much as you loved me.”<sup>1</sup>

When we are in perfect unity with God the Father and with Jesus – one with him in the same way that he is one with the Father – then we will also be in perfect unity with one another. The book of Acts described it as “having one heart and one mind.”<sup>2</sup> It meant that they shared everything in common and no one was in need among them. That is what it means to be in perfect unity – you live your life, looking out for one another rather than yourselves.

Jesus said that when we do that, the world will know that the Father sent him, and that the Father loves us just as much as the Father loves him.

What an incredible promise.

The world will know. That’s why thousands got saved in the book of Acts. That’s why Luke described more people being added to their number every day while also describing how they shared everything in common.

This conditional promise is what Christianity is all about! This conditional promise is what defines the true Christian life – the kind of life we see in the book of Acts. This conditional promise is where everything changes. When you understand what God offers in this conditional promise, you’ll stop seeing the cost of following Jesus as something you *have* to do, and you’ll start seeing it as something you’re *happy* to do, because like Paul, you’ll see that everything else is worthless compared to truly knowing Jesus.

In the next few chapters, I want to look at a few more examples of some conditional promises found in the New Testament. As we’ve seen, Jesus said, “If you obey my commands, then I will reveal myself to you,” and, “If you obey my commands, then I and the Father will make our homes with you,” and, “If you abide in me (which means obeying his commands), then I will abide in you.”

However, most Christians think, “If I believe in Jesus, he will reveal

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<sup>1</sup> John 17:23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 4:32-35

himself to me,” and, “If I believe in Jesus, he and the Father will make their homes with me,” and, “If I abide in him (which means praying and reading my Bible), then he will abide in me.”

In the same way, there are a number of other promises in Scripture that Christians tend to look at and completely miss what it actually says. However, most (if not all) of those promises are built on the foundation of what we’ve talked about in this chapter – if we obey his commands, then, and only then, will we truly know him and experience him like we see in the Bible. Because if we obey his commands, then, and only then are we true Christians as defined by Scripture.



# Chapter 19

## Why Don't My Prayers Get Answered?

In the last chapter, we looked at some of the promises found throughout the New Testament. We talked about how many Christians think those promises are for anyone who calls themselves a Christian, and they assume those promises are for them, when really those promises are only for people who live according to the commands of Jesus.

The New Testament was written to Christians who lived the way we see in the early Church in Acts. They shared everything in common. They gave up their possessions. They prioritized the needs of others rather than themselves.

When the New Testament gives us some of these promises, those promises were written to people who lived like that. They weren't written to the modern Church. Those promises are only for people who live the same way the early Church lived.

In this chapter, I want to address another one of those conditional promises: Prayer.

How many times have we read or heard the following promises in Scripture?

“I tell you the truth, if your faith is the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move. All things will be possible for you.”<sup>1</sup>

“I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will be able to do what I did to this tree and even more. You will be able to say to this mountain, ‘Go, fall into the sea.’ And if you have faith, it will happen. If you have faith, you will get anything you ask for in prayer.”<sup>2</sup>

“I tell you the truth, you can say to this mountain, ‘Go, fall into the sea.’ And if you have no doubts in your heart and believe that what you say will happen, God will do it for you. So I tell you to believe that you have received everything you ask for in prayer, and God will give them to you.”<sup>3</sup>

These are some of the most incredible promises found in the Bible. Jesus promised that if you have faith, you can move literal mountains through prayer. He promised that nothing will be impossible for you. He promised that you, too, can curse a fig tree and see it wither up. You can receive anything

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 17:20

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 21:21-22

<sup>3</sup> Mark 11:22-24

you ask for in prayer. You can live the kind of life that Jesus lived.

This is why his apostles did the same things he did. The apostles did many signs and wonders<sup>1</sup>: Peter and John healed a cripple<sup>2</sup>; Peter is recorded as healing everyone who came to him; even Peter's shadow healed people when it passed over them!<sup>3</sup> Paul's handkerchief was used to heal people!<sup>4</sup> Peter raised the dead<sup>5</sup>; Paul raised the dead<sup>6</sup>; Paul healed every single person who was sick on the island of Malta.<sup>7</sup>

The apostles weren't the only ones living a life marked by this kind of powerful prayer: Stephen was filled with power.<sup>8</sup> Ananias was led by the Spirit and healed Paul.<sup>9</sup> Philip performed many miracles and cast out demons.<sup>10</sup>

The incredible promises of Jesus proved to be true time and time again in the early Church. Those who followed Jesus were heard by God. Those who followed Jesus received anything they asked for. Their prayers were answered in undeniable ways.

Yet today, these same promises make Christians feel uncomfortable. Christians today try to explain these promises away. They come up with excuse after excuse for why these promises aren't true in their own lives or in the lives of any other Christians they know. Today, Christians pray and often feel like they weren't heard. The power of God that defined the early Church is missing from Christianity today.

And Christians don't understand why.

Over the years, I've read many books about prayer. I've heard the advice of countless Christian teachers and preachers and authors as they try to motivate Christians to pray. Depending on their background and denomination, they have a wide array of excuses for why their prayers don't seem to be heard.

Some say that it's because you only receive what you ask for if you're asking for something that's God's will, so you have to just ask, and if it's God's will, he will give it to you, and if it's not, then he won't.

Others say that it's because prayer takes time to be answered, so you just have to be patient.

Others insist that you just have to believe that your prayer *was*

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:43, 4:33, 5:12

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 3:1-10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 5:12-16

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 19:11-12

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 9:36-43

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Acts 20:7-12

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Acts 28:7-9

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Acts 6:8

<sup>9</sup> Ref. Acts 9:10-19

<sup>10</sup> Ref. Acts 8:5-13

answered, even if it's clearly obvious that it wasn't. They claim they healed someone when that person actually remained sick, or even died. They think that if you acknowledge that a prayer wasn't answered, you "curse" yourself and guarantee that the prayer won't be answered because you proved that you don't have faith. So, they just refuse to acknowledge the problem. They refuse to recognize that God doesn't answer their prayers.

And still others insist that their prayers *do* get answered. But they never ask for anything that would require any kind of *miracle*. They comfort themselves in the belief that their prayers are heard, when really they're only ever asking for things that are very likely to happen anyway. They tell others that they see miracles – that their prayers are heard and answered regularly. But none of their so-called "miracles" can even compare to what happened in the early Church.

None of these excuses are biblical.

Yet all these Christians have their Bible verses they use to back up these beliefs. They pick Bible verses, take them out of context, ignore other verses that directly contradict their conclusions, and use these verses to defend their argument. They think they're defending the truth, when really they're just defending their own beliefs and refusing to admit that maybe there's something wrong with their doctrines and theology. They refuse to admit that the promises in Scripture don't seem to be true for them.

The early Church didn't look like this. Their prayers were heard. They received what they asked for. They experienced the literal fulfillment of the promises of Jesus with no strings attached. There was no denying that their prayers were heard, and they weren't only asking for trivial things that were likely to happen anyway. Cripples leaped for joy.<sup>1</sup> Paralyzed people walked home.<sup>2</sup> Dead people woke up.<sup>3</sup> They experienced a life entirely unlike what Christians experience today.

Why?

Why did Jesus make such grand promises about our prayers being answered? Why do we see the early Church experiencing his promises as true, yet our experience today is the exact opposite? What's wrong?

To understand what's wrong, we need to address the lies that Christians believe. First, we need to understand *faith*. We've already discussed *faith* throughout this book. In the Bible, and in the promises Jesus gave us about prayer, the word translated *faith* is the Greek word *pístis*. And the word translated *believe* is rooted in that same word – *pístis*.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 3:1-10

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 9:32-35

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 9:36-43, 20:7-12

The Greek word *pístis* didn't mean *faith* like we tend to think of it today. And it didn't mean *believe* like we think of it today. It always meant *believing* and *obeying* at the same time. It meant *faith* and *faithfulness*, and included both at the same time – it was never just one or the other. It meant *loyalty*. It meant *fidelity*. It meant *reliability*.

That's the kind of *faith* Jesus was talking about. That's the type of *faith* that the biblical authors intended. We're not supposed to be people who merely believe in Jesus and trust that he is who he said he is. We're not supposed to be people who merely believe that he will answer our prayers. We're supposed to be people he can trust, too. We're supposed to be faithful. We're supposed to be loyal. We're supposed to be reliable.

When Jesus promised that if we have faith, we can move mountains, he was promising that if we are people who live in complete loyalty and fidelity to God, then we are people who will receive whatever we ask from God. His promise wasn't just about believing our prayers are answered. His promise was about what it means to be a Christian in the first place.

The kind of faith that results in answered prayer is the same kind of faith that we need for salvation. It's the kind of faith where we live the kind of life God wants us to live. It's the kind of faith where we prioritize what God said is important, and we obey his commands and forget about anything else or anyone else other than him.

That's the kind of faith the Bible talks about. And we can see in many places that it's the kind of faith we're supposed to have when we are talking about prayer. For example, when thinking about prayer, many Christians think about verses like these:

“In Christ we have access to God with boldness and with confidence. We can do this through faith in Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses. He was tempted in every way that we are, but he did not sin. Let us, then, confidently approach God's throne of grace. There we can receive mercy and find grace to help us when we need it.”<sup>2</sup>

“So, brothers and sisters, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place without fear by means of the blood of Jesus' death. We can enter through a new and living way that Jesus opened for us. It leads through the curtain – Christ's flesh. And since we have a great priest over God's house, let us come near to God with a sincere heart and a confident faith, because we have had our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies have been washed

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:12

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 4:15-16

with pure water.”<sup>1</sup>

“My dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God.”<sup>2</sup>

Christians look at verses like these, and they get encouraged. They read these and think, “I can have confidence before God. I can come before God boldly. I have free access to God now because of Jesus.” And while, yes, that’s true... it’s only true for those who are true followers of Jesus.

People today hear a gospel preached that says you can be saved without doing anything. They believe in a message that says you are a Christian if you believe in Jesus, and it’s entirely based on whether or not you believe the correct information. They accept this gospel, and then they think that all the promises in the New Testament are for them.

But that is not the gospel preached in Scripture.

Scripture says you must obey Jesus, or you aren’t saved; Scripture says you must live your life obeying the commands of Jesus or you aren’t actually a Christian at all.<sup>3</sup> And if you’re not actually a Christian, then these promises aren’t for you – even if you think you are a Christian.

Jesus said, “Not all those who say to me, ‘Lord! Lord!’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants. On the last day many people will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and did many mighty works in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you. Get away from me, you who practice lawlessness.’ Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house. But it did not collapse, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a stupid man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and slammed against that house, and it collapsed with a big crash.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus was clear: Not all who call him Lord will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but only those who obey his commands – those who do what God wants. If they call him “Lord,” but he tells them, “I never knew you,” and sends them away from him... were they really Christians?

They clearly thought they were. They called him “Lord,” they prophesied, they cast out demons in his name, they did many things in his name. But Jesus never knew them. If Jesus never knew them, then they never

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 10:19-22

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:21

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 8:51, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23, 15:10, 15:14; Galatians 5:6; James 2:14-26; 1 John 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 3:9-11, 3:16-18, 3:23-24, 4:16, 4:19-21, 5:3

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:21-27

really were Christians – and they never actually had the life they thought they had.

Jesus told a parable where he said that on the last day, he will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.<sup>1</sup> He will tell the sheep to enter into rest *because they obeyed his commands*. And he will tell the goats to depart from him and sends them into eternal punishment *because they did not obey his commands*.

He won't separate them based on what information they accepted as true. He will separate them based on what they *did*.

True saving faith is about fidelity. It's about loyalty. It's about living a radical life of obedience to the commands of Jesus. It's about being a trustworthy servant – a reliable servant. Jesus was saying anyone who doesn't live that way isn't actually a Christian – even if they think they are.

So, here's the thing: If those people aren't actually Christians, then those people can't confidently approach the throne of God. They don't have free access to God. The access to God that's available through Jesus is not available to them because they didn't join themselves to Jesus in fidelity. They didn't choose to begin obeying his commands.

Christians today read some of the grand promises in Scripture, and they assume those promises are for them – but they don't accept the lifestyle that Jesus said you have to live to be his follower. They don't recognize that those verses weren't written to American Christians who live cushy American lives and pursue the American dream.

Those verses were written to the early Church – to people who gave up everything to follow Jesus, people who shared everything in common, who looked out for one another more than they looked out for themselves, who hated the things of this world and lived simple, humble lives so their resources could go toward helping their brothers and sisters. The promise of free access to God is for people like that. It's not for people who call Jesus "Lord" but refuse to obey what he said to do.

John said, "Here is the message we have heard from Christ and now proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. So if we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth. But if we live in the light, as God is in the light, we can share fellowship with each other. Then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin."<sup>2</sup>

Look at what John said. God is light. He's in the light. Everything around him is light, and there is no darkness whatsoever. So, if you say you

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 1:5-7

have fellowship with God – if you say you can come before him with confidence, if you say you have free access to God, if you say you can be heard by God – but you’re in the darkness, then you’re a liar and you don’t follow the truth.

Why?

Because God isn’t in the darkness. If you’re still in the darkness, you can’t come before God with confidence because he isn’t there with you. You don’t have access to God if you live in darkness. But if we live in the light, just like God is in the light, then we can have fellowship with him, then we can come before him with confidence, then we have free access to him, and our prayers are heard.

It’s not a promise for those who live in the darkness. It’s only a promise for those who live in the light. And living in the light isn’t about “believing in Jesus.” Living in the light means obeying his commands. Shortly after saying this, John clarified, “Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. *Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light* and there is no cause of stumbling in him. But whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”<sup>1</sup>

Saying, “I am in the light” doesn’t mean you’re actually in the light! You’re only in the light if you love the brothers and sisters – not with the world’s love, but with God’s love. John clarified what true love is many times throughout his letter, and we’ve discussed those verses throughout this book.<sup>2</sup>

You are only in the light and have access to God if you live in God’s radical love – the kind of love Jesus showed for us, where you drop everything and look out for others before looking out for yourself. That’s what it means to live in the light. Anyone who claims to have fellowship with God, but doesn’t live this way, is a liar. They don’t have the fellowship with God that they think they have. They don’t follow the truth. They don’t have access to God.

Christians today don’t understand why their prayers aren’t being answered because they don’t understand that these amazing promises aren’t for them. These promises are only for those who live in the light – radically loving without concern for themselves, obeying the commands of Jesus.

In other words, these promises are only for those who love Jesus. Jesus said, “Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me, and my Father will love those who love me. I will love them and will reveal myself to them... If people love me, they will obey my teaching. My Father

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:9-11, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:16-18, 4:9-12

will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus said the only ones who actually love him are the ones who obey his commands. Anyone who refuses to obey his commands doesn't actually love him. If that's what Jesus said it means to love him, then ask yourself: Can someone be a Christian without loving Jesus?

Can someone have fellowship with God and enter into his presence if they don't love him?

John said, “Loving God means obeying his commands.”<sup>2</sup>

Christians shouldn't expect their prayers to be answered if they're not obeying the radical commands of Jesus – because if they're not obeying him, they prove they don't love him. That means they're not really Christians.

And if they're not really Christians, they can't come before God with confidence. If they're not really Christians, they don't have free access to God. If they're not really Christians, then they're still in the darkness. And God is not in the darkness! That's what John was trying to get us to understand throughout his letter. And this teaching about prayer is something found all throughout the Bible. God doesn't listen to the prayers of people who refuse to obey what he told them to do.

God said, “When you raise your arms to me in prayer, I will refuse to look at you. Even if you say many prayers, I will not listen to you... Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Stop doing the evil things I see you do. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Help the orphans. Stand up for the rights of widows.”<sup>3</sup>

When God said this to Israel, he said that they were still bringing him sacrifices, they were keeping the feasts, they were worshiping him, they were coming to his Temple, they were keeping the Sabbath, and they were having holy meetings. But he wouldn't listen to their prayers.

Why?

Because they were living wrong. Their lives were consumed with themselves. He told them to wash themselves and make themselves clean; that's the same thing John said: If we live in the light, then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin.<sup>4</sup> But in Isaiah, God said what that means: He told them to change their actions. Cleansing yourself from sin is not just about receiving forgiveness; it's about no longer living in that sin. John was saying the same thing Isaiah said: you are not living in the light if you continue living the wrong way. In Isaiah, God told them he would not listen to their prayers because they had not cleansed themselves – they were still

<sup>1</sup> John 14:21,23

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 5:3

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 1:15-17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7



consumed with themselves, living in sin, without repenting. They didn't look out for others. Love didn't define their lives. He told them that if they wanted their prayers to be heard, they needed to stop doing wrong, they needed to do good, seek justice, help the oppressed, help orphans, and help widows.

If we live in the light, then the blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses us from every sin – it washes our consciences,<sup>1</sup> making us “pure people who belong only to him – people who are always wanting to do good deeds.”<sup>2</sup> His blood washes us “so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>3</sup> We are washed “so we would die to sin and start living for righteousness.”<sup>4</sup>

His blood doesn't just wash away past sins for the sake of forgiveness. His blood washes us so we no longer live how we used to live. His blood transforms us so we stop doing wrong, and learn to do good – so we seek justice, help the oppressed, help orphans, and help widows. If our lives haven't been transformed, then we haven't been washed. And, if we haven't been washed, then, like Israel, God won't listen to our prayers.

Isaiah said again, “You do what pleases yourselves on these fast days, and you are unfair to your workers. Even when you fast, you argue and fight and hit with wicked fists. You cannot do these things as you do now and believe your prayers are heard in heaven. Is this the fast that I want? Do I want a day when people afflict themselves? I don't want people just to bow their heads like a plant, stretching out on sackcloth and ashes. Is this what you call a fast? Do you really think this pleases the LORD? I will tell you the kind of fast I want: Free the people you have put in prison unfairly and undo their chains. Free the oppressed and stop their hard labor. Share your food with the hungry and bring poor, homeless people into your own homes. When you see someone who has no clothes, give him yours, and don't refuse to help your own relatives. Then your light will shine like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your righteousness will walk before you, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. Then you will call out, and the LORD will answer. You will cry out, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’”<sup>5</sup>

God was telling his people to change their lives. They fasted, they prayed, they asked God why he wasn't answering their prayers. He told them to stop living for themselves. He told them to share with those in need, to welcome homeless people into their own homes, to clothe the naked, and to help the brothers and sisters. He told them that if they lived that way, they

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Hebrews 9:14, 10:19-23

<sup>2</sup> Titus 2:14

<sup>3</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>4</sup> 1 Peter 2:24

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 58:3-9

would see their prayers answered, they would know God, he would walk with them and answer them when they cried out to him. Their prayers would be answered if, and only if, they obeyed God's commands.

He said again, "Surely the LORD's hand is not too short to save you. He can hear you when you ask him for help. It is your evil that has separated you from your God. Your sins cause him to hide his face from you, so he does not hear you."<sup>1</sup>

And again, "Whoever ignores the poor when they cry for help will also cry for help and not be answered."<sup>2</sup>

And again, "When I called to them, they would not listen. So when they called to me, I would not listen..."<sup>3</sup>

These are just a few examples. The message of the prophets contained this message time and time again. The Israelites thought they were God's people. They brought him sacrifices. They worshiped him. They fasted. They prayed. But their prayers weren't answered because the way they lived was evil in God's eyes. God is in the light. But the Israelites were in the darkness. They didn't have access to him. They couldn't come before him. They needed to wash themselves and make themselves clean.

The message of the prophets didn't become irrelevant in the New Testament. Peter told us to closely follow what the prophets said as if we were following a light in a dark place.<sup>4</sup> Their message is still true for us. God is still looking for those who obey his commands. He still only promises to answer the prayers of those who live their lives for him – obeying him no matter the cost.

Jesus said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you."<sup>5</sup>

We're very familiar with the times Jesus said, "If you have faith, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you." Here, Jesus said the exact same thing. But he said it in different words. He said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you." But this is the same promise – because "having faith" means having fidelity! It means loyalty. It means you obey. And as we saw in the last chapter, *abiding in him* means *obeying him*. It means you have *fidelity*. It means you have *loyalty*. It means you're *reliable*.

John said, "The people who obey God's commands abide in God, and

<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 59:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 21:13

<sup>3</sup> Zechariah 7:13

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 1:19

<sup>5</sup> John 15:7

God abides in them.”<sup>1</sup>

So, when Jesus said, “If you abide in me and my words abide in you, you can ask anything you want, and it will be done for you...” he was saying, “if you obey my commands, and if my commands live in you – they’re in your life, they consume your life, they’re living in you – *then* you can ask whatever you want, and it will be done for you.” Jesus was saying the same thing the prophets had said to Israel. John said it very directly: “My dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God. And *God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.*”<sup>2</sup>

Again: “God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”

John was clear throughout the context of this verse (and the whole letter of 1 John) that God’s commands are about loving others – meeting their needs, loving through action, laying down our lives, and helping the brothers and sisters.<sup>3</sup> And here, John said that if we live like that, we will receive what we ask for from God; and we will receive what we ask for from God *because* we live like that.

According to John, our prayers are answered *because* we obey God’s commands. We receive what we ask *because* we live in love – we meet the needs of others, we prioritize the lives of others above our own comfort, our own needs, and our own lives. We receive what we ask for *if* we live like Jesus lived – laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters, living in the light.

James said the same thing: “The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being just like us. He prayed that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years! Then Elijah prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the land produced crops again.”<sup>4</sup>

James was saying that our prayers can have the same power as Elijah’s prayers. Elijah stopped the rain for over three years through his prayers. Then he prayed again, and it began to rain. Our prayers can have that same kind of power. But James didn’t say, “The prayer of someone who *believes* is powerful and effective.” He didn’t say, “The prayer of someone who *accepts the correct information* is powerful and effective.” He said, “The prayer of a *righteous person* is powerful and effective.”

It’s the prayer of a righteous person – that’s the kind of prayer that has power. A *righteous person* is someone who does what is right. John said, “Dear children, do not let anyone deceive you. *The one who does what is right is righteous,*

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:24

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:21-22, emphasis added

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:3-6, 3:11-18, 3:23, 4:21

<sup>4</sup> James 5:16-18

just as Christ is righteous.”<sup>1</sup>

John said that a righteous person is someone who does what is right... which means James was saying that the prayer of someone who does what is right is powerful and effective like Elijah’s prayer.

If you want your prayer to be powerful and effective like Elijah’s prayer, then you must live right. You must change your actions. You must live a life that is pleasing to God where you obey his commands and live in radical love and stop looking out for yourself.

Peter said the same thing: “The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears on their prayers. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, the Lord listens to the prayers of those who live the way God says is right, but he does not listen to the prayers of those who do what God says is evil. The promise that our prayers will be heard and that we will receive whatever we ask for is contingent on us living the kind of life God commanded us to live. This is, again, the same thing the prophets said, the same thing James said, the same thing John said, and the same thing Jesus said. If you want your prayer to be powerful and effective – like Elijah – then you must live your life doing what God says is right. You must obey his commands. You must live the kind of life that he approves of. You must abide in him.

The promises from Jesus that our prayers will be answered if we have faith were all saying that our prayers will be answered if we have fidelity, loyalty, reliability, and faithfulness. Jesus was saying our prayers will be answered if we live our lives in complete submission and obedience to him. John said the same thing. James said the same thing. Peter said the same thing.

Why?

Because that’s when we’re living in the light. We can only have fellowship with God if we’re living in the light. If you are not obeying him, then you are not a Christian. And if you’re not a Christian, then you don’t have free access to God through Jesus. This is the consistent message throughout Scripture – both Old and New Testaments.

So, if this is so consistently the message in Scripture, why is it something that I have never once heard any Christian teacher even mention?

Why do Christian teachers ignore these verses? Why do they focus on the outlying verses, take them out of context, make them say something different, and then tell us that that’s what the Bible teaches? Why? Because they care more about their own theology than they do what the Bible actually

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:7, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 3:12

says. If God only listens to the prayers of those who obey his commands (like John directly said), then Protestant theology has some major holes in it.

The fundamental principles of Protestant theology stand on the foundation that our actions play no role in our relationship with God.

Protestants believe that you can become a Christian and have a full relationship with God and be heard by God simply by believing in the correct information. These verses completely contradict that. So, they completely ignore the verses that prove their theology is wrong. Not only do they ignore them, but they refuse to even draw attention to them.

I recently skimmed through an extremely popular book on prayer. I found the chapter that addressed these extraordinary promises of Jesus that we can receive anything we ask for as long as we have faith. I looked through that chapter to get a feel for what that so-called “teacher” was teaching. He had a whole chapter on why we should receive what we ask for in prayer, and he didn’t even mention where John said, “God gives us what we ask for because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.”<sup>1</sup>

*He didn’t even mention it!*

It directly addresses the issue he claimed to be addressing, yet he didn’t even point it out. And, it’s not just him. I spent twenty-five years in the institutional Protestant Church, listening to the teaching of men, learning from them, following them, and trusting them. I read countless books on prayer and listened to dozens or hundreds of sermons on prayer. Yet I hadn’t ever once heard anyone mention this verse.

Not once.

They’re not teaching the word of God. They’re teaching their own theology. And this verse doesn’t fit their theology, so they don’t mention it.

“My people, your guides lead you astray and turn you away from what is right.”<sup>2</sup>

“You keep saying, ‘We are wise, because we have the teachings of the LORD.’ But actually, those who explain the Scriptures have written lies with their pens. These wise teachers rejected the word of the LORD, so what wisdom is in them? They will be humiliated. They will be shocked and trapped.”<sup>3</sup>

“Stay away from the Pharisees; they are blind guides. And if a blind person guides a blind person, both will fall into a pit.”<sup>4</sup>

“Woe to you, you experts on the law. You have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves did not enter, and you stopped others from

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:22

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 3:12

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 8:8-9

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 15:14

entering, too.”<sup>1</sup>

When these “teachers” talk about prayer and try to address the fact that their prayers aren’t being answered like Jesus promised, they very often turn to one single verse as their answer. They turn to this verse:

“And this is the confidence we have before God: that if we ask God for anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know he hears us in whatever we ask, we know we have what we ask from him.”<sup>2</sup>

These teachers use this verse as an excuse to negate all the other extraordinary promises in the Bible. They say that this verse means you can’t really know if you will receive what you ask for – because it might not be God’s will. They say you should just start making more and more requests because every now and then you’ll make one that lines up with God’s will, and you’ll see that prayer get answered.

Essentially, they say that praying according to God’s will is like shooting at a moving target in the dark. You can’t know that you’re going to get it. You just know that if it’s God’s will, then you’ll get it. And they encourage you to just keep shooting, because occasionally some of those shots will hit the target.

John began this verse by saying, “This is the confidence we have before God...” So, John was trying to tell us how much confidence we can have. But that’s the best they think he was saying? ...that this is the confidence we have before God: that sometimes when we ask for something, it will line up with his will and we will receive what we ask for... sometimes...?

What kind of confidence is that?

That’s not confidence! And every Christian who has ever accepted their teaching knows there’s no confidence in it. That’s why most Christians don’t expect their prayers to get answered! They think they’re shooting blindly at a moving target! They think praying according to God’s will is some mystery and they’ll never be able to know for sure if they’re in his will or not.

This verse is used as an excuse because these teachers don’t see their *own* prayers getting answered the way Jesus says they should! They take this one verse, they overwrite all the other verses in the Bible that say we should expect to see our prayers get answered, and they just say, “we have to just submit it to God’s will. If it’s his will, it’ll happen. If it’s not his will, then it won’t.”

This isn’t biblical!

Praying according to God’s will isn’t supposed to be something where

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 11:52

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 5:14-15

we shoot blindly at a moving target, never sure if it's God's will or not, never sure if our prayers will be answered or not. Jesus said we should receive *everything* we ask! When he said, "everything," he meant *everything*! And we see that demonstrated in the early Church throughout the book of Acts.

Praying according to God's will is not a mystery. It's not something that's supposed to leave us guessing. "God's will" is a phrase that simply means *what God wants*. And the Bible tells us what God wants!

The entire Bible teaches us what God wants – what he cares about, what he wants us to be doing, what he values. Most Christians don't know God's will simply because they don't read the Bible to *learn*. Most Christians don't know God's will simply because they spend so much time listening to other teachers that they don't even realize those teachers weren't sent by God in the first place. John called them the antichrist.<sup>1</sup> There's nothing to learn from them.

But, they trust those teachers, and they never get around to learning what the Bible itself actually says.

Paul said, "Therefore brothers and sisters, since God has shown us great mercy, I urge you to offer your lives as a living sacrifice to him. Your offering must be holy and pleasing to him, which is the true way for you to worship. Do not be conformed to this world; instead be transformed by a new way of thinking. *Then you will be able to discern what is God's will; you will know what is good and pleasing to him and what is perfect.*"<sup>2</sup>

Those who obey God's commands – they offer their entire lives as a living sacrifice to God, they stay holy, they live pleasing God, they don't conform to this world, they're transformed by a new way of thinking – their prayers are answered just like Jesus promised, with no strings attached!

Why?

Because those who live that way will be able to discern what is God's will. They will know what God wants. They will know what is good, what is pleasing to him, and what is perfect. They're not shooting blindly at a moving target. They know his thoughts, they know his mind, they know his will. There's no question as to whether or not it's something God wants.

So, this verse where John said that we have to pray according to God's will – it's not a verse that can be used as an excuse for your prayers not being answered. You're supposed to know God's will. If you don't know God's will, something is wrong with the way you're living – because Paul said that if you live correctly, you will become capable of knowing God's will.

John wasn't trying to tell people that they can't be sure if their prayers

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-27

<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:1-2, emphasis added

will be answered because they can't be sure if it's God's will or not! He was saying the opposite. He was trying to give them confidence! He was trying to tell them that they can be confident that their prayers will be answered. Jesus didn't say, "If you have faith, you can say to this mountain, 'be thrown into the sea,' and it will be done for you... if it's God's will."

No.

Jesus said that if you have faith – as in loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness – where you wholeheartedly abandon this world and cling only to Jesus and live only for God and no longer live for yourself – then you can ask for anything and it will be done for you. Period.

Why? Because you will know what God wants. You will know what he cares about. You will want what he wants. You will ask for the things he wants because you want those things, too. You will live in the light, as he is in the light.<sup>1</sup> You will walk by the Spirit, as Jesus walked by the Spirit.<sup>2</sup> You will be one with God in the same way that Jesus was one with God.<sup>3</sup> The promises in the New Testament about prayer are promises about the new life we have when we're born again. Our prayers will be answered because we're in the light: We're walking by the Spirit. We want what God wants. Our very nature has changed.<sup>4</sup>

These promises about prayer stand on the same conditions we saw in the last chapter about receiving the Holy Spirit. Why? Because those conditions are what it means to be a Christian in the first place, and all the promises in the New Testament are only for people who are true Christians. They're not promises for all the false brothers and sisters that Jesus and the apostles warned us would fill the Church.<sup>5</sup> They're not promises for apostate believers.

They're only promises for those who take up their cross and follow Jesus to death.<sup>6</sup> They're only promises for people who truly accept the cost of

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 3:21, 8:12, 11:9, 12:35-36, 12:45; Acts 26:18; Ephesians 5:8-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:4-9; 1 Peter 2:9; 1 John 1:5-7, 2:10

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 12:8; Luke 4:18, 11:13; John 3:5-6, 14:15-17, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7-15; Romans 7:6, 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16, 5:22-25

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 17:21-23; Ephesians 3:19

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 15:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 2:19-20, 3:27, 5:16, 5:22-25; Ephesians 4:22-24, 5:8-10; Philippians 2:17; Colossians 2:11-15, 3:9-10; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 8:6, 8:8-12, 9:14, 10:14-23; 1 Peter 1:2, 1:17-23, 2:24-25; 2 Peter 1:2-4; 1 John 2:3-4, 2:9-11, 3:7-11

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 13:24-30, 13:36-43, 24:11; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:3-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3, 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 2:18-27, 3:7-10, 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:38-39, 16:23-25; Mark 8:33-35; Luke 9:23-24, 14:25-27, 17:33; John 12:24-26; Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:19-20, 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 2:11-12, 2:20, 3:1-4, 3:9-10



following Jesus and give up everything to be his disciple.<sup>1</sup> They're only for people who no longer live for themselves, but live for him.<sup>2</sup>

It's not about just "believing hard enough." We must walk in the light. We must be one with Christ. We must be joined to him and receive his nature so our old thoughts, our old ways, and our old desires leave us. We must be washed in his blood and cleansed in the same way God told Israel to wash themselves and be cleansed.<sup>3</sup> If we say we have fellowship with God, but we walk in darkness, we're liars.<sup>4</sup> But if we receive his Spirit – not just manifestations or power, but the transformation of a new heart with new desires – then we will begin to walk in the light.<sup>5</sup> Walking in the light means obeying his commands and living the way he wants us to live.<sup>6</sup>

And if we obey his commands then we know we have whatever we ask, because if we're obeying his commands then we can have fellowship with God – because we are also in the light where God is!

This is a crucial teaching that is largely missing in the Church today.

While there are many preachers who teach that Christians should be able to receive whatever they ask for in prayer, they don't understand (or at least preach) that those Christians can only receive what they ask if they're walking in the light and obeying Jesus. They don't teach people what it means to receive a new heart and become one with Jesus. They don't teach that we should be people who, when we do things it's not really us doing them, but Jesus doing it through us. They don't teach that people need to first change. They think that *faith* means *believing something*, so they teach that people just need to start believing that they have fellowship with God. They assume that everyone who calls themselves a Christian is a true Christian... so they try to teach unrepentant sinners how to walk in the power of a Holy Spirit they haven't yet received!

If someone is still living in darkness, they don't have fellowship with God! That person shouldn't expect their prayers to be answered because they don't live in the light, they aren't one with Jesus, and they don't abide in him.

Being one with God and being like Jesus is more than just having power and performing signs and wonders. It means your desires change: You want what he wants. You care about what he cares about. You do what he would do. You love with his love. You live as he lived.

Often we look at the book of Acts, and we just want the power. But

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Luke 14:33

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:16-17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Galatians 5:16; Romans 6-8

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 2:9-11

the primary job of the Spirit is to give us a new heart – to write the Law on our hearts.<sup>1</sup> If we don't have a new heart, we don't have the Spirit, and if we don't have the Spirit, we can't walk in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is our new nature. He is what causes us to not want the things of this world, but to want what God wants.<sup>2</sup> So, if we still want this world, and if we still want what is evil, we need to stop asking God for the power we see in Acts, and we need to start asking for the new heart. If we have the Spirit living in us, we should stop wanting evil.

That was the primary mission of the Spirit from the beginning. The promise of the New Covenant was that he would write the Law on our hearts.<sup>3</sup> He would make us people who no longer want what God hates, but instead we would want what he wants. Paul said, "Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead."<sup>4</sup>

This explains a lot of the problems in the Church today. We read in Acts about the unstoppable Church, and many Christians long for those days to return. They want to see the Spirit moving. They want to see the sick healed. They want to see the dead raised. They want to command demons to leave people. They want to see thousands, or millions, converted. They want the power of God moving in their lives.

But they don't want the cost of following Jesus. They don't want to give up their American lifestyle. They don't want to give up the things of this world. They don't want to give up their comfort. They want to keep prioritizing themselves. They want to meet their own needs, reach their own preferred standard of living, and then they'll help others when they're able.

Christians today are trying to gain all the benefits of a life with God, but they don't want the cost he said comes with it!

The Church today has a problem in that Christians either avoid talking about the power of God entirely and convince themselves that those things don't happen anymore, or they focus entirely on having the power of God and ignore the cost of following Jesus. They want to have an experience. They want it for themselves. But they don't want to change their lives and give up their comfort.

As a result, we have a modern church where the sick are rarely healed, the dead are almost never raised, the lost are convinced that God doesn't even exist (despite living in a so-called "Christian" country), and Christians often seem to only "encounter God" when singing songs with loud music and

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:5-18; Hebrews 8:8-13, 10:15-18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 8:1-17; Galatians 5:16-25; Titus 2:11-14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:5-18; Hebrews 8:8-13, 10:15-18

<sup>4</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

flashing lights – the same ingredients that create a spiritual experience at any secular rock concert.

This isn't the kind of Christianity God offered us. He offers so much more than this.

In the Book of Acts, we read about an unstoppable Church. The apostles performed many signs and miracles, there were no needy people in the Church, they faced persecution with boldness, they spread the Gospel into many different countries in just a few short years, and countless people were saved everywhere they went.

Nothing could stop them.

Satan was back-peddling, desperately trying to slow down the advance of God's Kingdom. God's Kingdom spread, shining the light into the darkness, kicking down the gates of Hell and rescuing the lost from the grip of God's enemy.

Today, at least in the West, we have a Church that is mostly stopped dead in their tracks.

This can change!

The stories we read about in Acts don't have to just be stories – that kind of life is available for every follower of Jesus! It's available for me. It's available for you. But you must get up and follow him. You must do what he did. You must do what he told us to do! You must trust him. Jesus promised us, "Don't fear, little flock, because your Father wants to give you the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

God wants to give us the Kingdom! He wants to use us! He wants to have a relationship with us! He is looking for people to work the harvest! But what was the very next thing Jesus said?

"Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Get for yourselves purses that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can't steal and moths can't destroy. Your heart will be where your treasure is."<sup>2</sup>

The Father wants to give you the Kingdom – so get your heart in the right place. Your heart will be wrapped up wherever your treasure is; so, stop treasuring this life and this world, and start treasuring God's Kingdom. How do you store up treasure in heaven? By going to church? By reading your Bible? By praying? No... Jesus told us how: Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Every time Jesus ever talked about treasure in heaven, he always said you get it by selling your possessions and giving to the poor.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:32

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:33-34

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-24 (compare Deuteronomy 15:7-11 to understand Jesus' phrase "if your eyes are good" and "if your eyes are evil"); Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 12:21-34, 18:22; 1 Timothy 6:17-10

You have treasure in heaven when you obey his commands, when you love with his radical love. And when you have treasure in heaven, you will start to value his Kingdom more than this world.

When we begin to obey his commands, we will begin to treasure his Kingdom more because he will come reveal himself to us, make his home with us, and show us how worthwhile he really is! He will come and live in us, talk to us, lead us, provide for us, teach us, answer our prayers, protect us, and so much more!

We will recognize the treasure that is buried in that field and realize how worthwhile it is to sell everything to get it.<sup>1</sup> The more we begin to obey, the more we will know him, and the more we know him, the more we will want to obey.

God offers us so much more than just eternal life. It's not that eternal life isn't an incredible gift – it totally is! But so many Christians think that Jesus died just so we can go to heaven someday, and they ignore the fact that he wanted to have a real relationship with us today – in this life. God offers us a real relationship with the One who created the universe. If we're united in fellowship with Him, nothing can stop us, nothing can stand in our way, nothing can crush us, and nothing can overwhelm us. With him on our side, we're more than conquerors!<sup>2</sup>

If we are joined to Christ, we've died with him and we've been raised with him. Scripture says we're a new creation!<sup>3</sup> Our old life – that life where we used to care about this world and the temporary pleasures of this world – that life is gone. We have something so much better. We get the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. We get the mind of Christ. We get to come into the presence of God with confidence, knowing that he listens to our prayers and answers them!

Our Christian lives don't have to be “dry” – lacking passion, feeling like we're missing something, and full of unanswered prayers. Christians can experience God today like they did in the early Church. But we must accept the cost of following Jesus, and we must begin to obey the commands he gave us in Scripture.

If we do that, then we can have fellowship with God, come before him with confidence, and we will receive anything we ask for in prayer.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 8:31-39

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:14-17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10

# Chapter 20

## Spiritual Blessings: What Did Paul Mean?

Sometimes when we read things in the New Testament, it sounds cool, and it seems good, but we don't really understand it. For example, Paul said, "In Christ, God has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places."<sup>1</sup>

When you read the words *every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places*, do you know what Paul was talking about? Do you know what those spiritual blessings are?

If you use this phrase (like many Christians do) when you're talking, praying, or singing worship songs, do you even understand what you're saying, or are you just using the words Paul used?

Was Paul just being artistic? Was he just being poetic? Are we supposed to know what Paul was talking about? Or was it something that Paul, as an apostle, understood, but we won't understand until Heaven?

Is this a verse that we should just be able to quote, or is this a verse we're supposed to fully understand?

So many times, Christians will read certain Bible verses and just assume that the author was using fluffy, flowery, artistic and poetic words to make what they're saying sound beautiful. Christians will hear these verses, and without even really understanding what was being said, they'll just say, "Amen! Yes! Amen! Yes!"

They do this because they read the Bible to be encouraged or feel good; they read it because they think reading it gives them life. They think that some of the verses we read are simply there to give praise to God, so all they get out of it is a warm feeling and they say, "Amen!"

But as we've already discussed, that's not the purpose of Scripture.

"All Scripture is breathed out by God and is useful for teaching, for showing people what is wrong in their lives, for correcting faults, and for training in righteousness. Using the Scriptures, the person who serves God will be capable, having all that is needed to do every good work."<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of all Scripture is for teaching, correction, and training in how we should live. It's not just for encouragement, it's not just for giving praise to God, and those verses aren't just being poetic. When people think a

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 1:3

<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16-17

verse, a passage, or an entire book of the Bible is just poetic for the sake of being poetic, the answer is simple – you just don't understand it.

When Paul was writing to the Ephesians, he wasn't just telling them, "God has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" just to tell them that! Paul wanted them to understand what he was talking about. He wanted them to understand what those spiritual blessings are. He wanted them to fully understand everything they have as a result of following Jesus.

A few verses later, he said, "I never cease giving thanks to God for you. I always remember you in my prayers, asking the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you spiritual wisdom and revelation so that you will know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so you will comprehend the hope to which he has called us and that you will know the riches of his glorious inheritance for his holy people. And you will know that God's power is overwhelmingly great for us who believe."<sup>1</sup>

So, here we see that Paul prayed that they would have...

- Spiritual wisdom and revelation so that they would know God better
- The eyes of their hearts enlightened so that...
  - They themselves would be able to comprehend the hope to which we are called
  - They themselves would know the riches of God's glorious inheritance for his holy people
  - They themselves would know that God's power is overwhelmingly great for those who believe

Paul didn't want people to just become Christians. He didn't want people to just believe in Jesus so they could go to heaven someday. No, Paul knew that God offers more. He offers so much more right now – in this life. God offers the ability for us to know him in a tangible way.

Today, most Christians seem to think that becoming a Christian is the end goal. They think this because they think it's all about going to heaven someday. They don't recognize what God is offering to us right now.

Paul didn't want people to just become Christians. He wanted them to mature. He wanted them to understand. He wanted them to have spiritual wisdom. He wanted them to have revelation.

He said that if they have this spiritual wisdom and revelation, then they will know God better. He wanted their spiritual eyes to be opened so they

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 1:16-19

could see and understand and comprehend and know all of what God freely gives to those who follow him. In short, he wanted them to understand, comprehend, and know what all those spiritual blessings in the heavenly places are!

He didn't just want us to know that there *are* spiritual blessings. He wanted us to know *what* those spiritual blessings are. He wanted us to understand what God is giving us. He wanted us to know what the spiritual reality is, and everything that Jesus purchased for us through his death and resurrection.

Paul prayed again for them a few chapters later: "I ask the Father out of his glorious riches to give you the power to be strong in the inner person through his Spirit. I pray that Christ will make his home in your hearts by faith and that your life will be rooted and grounded in love. And I pray that you and all God's holy people will have the power to comprehend the greatness of Christ's love – how wide and how long and how high and how deep that love is. Christ's love is beyond comprehension, but I pray that you will be able to know that love. Then you can be filled with the fullness of God."<sup>1</sup>

Again, this is one of those verses that so many Christians read, quote, say "Amen!" to it, and write into fluffy, feel-good worship songs. But do they even understand what Paul was saying? Here he prayed that they would be able to comprehend the greatness of Christ's love – even though it's incomprehensible!

Think about that.

He wanted them to know the unknowable, to comprehend the incomprehensible. He wanted them to be able to wrap their minds around something that cannot be wrapped around. And he explained why – if they were strong in the inner person, if Christ made his home in their hearts, if they were rooted and grounded in love, and if they comprehended the incomprehensible love of Christ, then they could be filled with the fullness of God!

*The fullness of God.*

That means they could be filled with *all of God!* All of God living in them – just like Jesus. Remember, Jesus prayed that we would be one<sup>2</sup> – not just one with each other (though that is part of it), but also one with him and one with the Father in the same way that he himself is one with the Father.

That's what Paul was saying here: That kind of oneness with God is only possible when we are strong in the inner person, when Christ makes his home in our hearts, when we are rooted and grounded in love, and when we

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 3:16-19

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 17:20-23

comprehend the incomprehensible love of Christ. It's the kind of life we see in the early Church throughout the book of Acts. It's the kind of life we're supposed to have, and it's only possible if we mature.

Paul recorded a similar prayer when he wrote to the Colossians: "Because of this, since the day we heard about you, we have not ceased praying for you, asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you will live the kind of life that is worthy of and pleases the Lord in every way. You will produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you will not give up when troubles come, but you will have patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father who has made you able to have a share in the inheritance of the holy ones in the light. God has rescued us from the power of darkness, and he brought us into the kingdom of his dearly loved Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins."<sup>1</sup>

Here, Paul prayed that God would...

- Fill them with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...
  - so that they would live the kind of life God wants
  - so that they would produce fruit in good works
  - so that they would grow in the knowledge of God
  - so that they would be strengthened with all power
  - so that they would not give up when troubles come, but rather have patience with joy and thankfulness

Paul wanted them to know God's will! We talked about this earlier when we were talking about prayer – a lot of Christians think God's will is some secret thing that we can't know. So, when they pray, they're shooting in the dark, hoping what they're praying is in line with God's will. Then, if their prayer isn't answered, they just say, "Well, I guess it wasn't God's will."

But that's not how it's supposed to be!

Paul was saying here (and in other places) that we should know God's will! The phrase "God's will" simply means *what God wants*. And here Paul explained that we can be filled with the knowledge of what God wants by having spiritual wisdom and understanding – and, that it will lead to us living the kind of life God wants with good works, it will lead to us growing in the knowledge of God, and it will give us strength and perseverance.

In short, if we grow in knowing what God wants, then we will grow in

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 1:9-14



living the life God wants. It makes sense!

Another thing Christians often don't understand is that when Paul (and the other apostles) wrote about the knowledge of God, they were not talking about knowing the correct facts, the right information, and the correct doctrines and theologies. The word *knowledge* doesn't mean *knowledge* like we often mean it today. The Greek word translated *knowledge* referred to a personal, experiential knowledge. In other words, Paul wasn't saying he wanted us to grow in knowing *about* God – he wanted us to grow in *knowing* God.

We should be people who know God, not just about God, in the same way that I know my wife, Tess. I know her personally. I know what she likes; I know what she doesn't like; I know what she cares about; I talk to her; I listen to her; she tells me her deepest secret thoughts; I know what she wants; I spend nearly every moment with her. I know her personally. I don't merely know *about* her as if I read about her in some book.

But that's often how we treat God today – it's more like we read about him in the Bible and learned things about him. We store up information, facts, doctrines, and theologies. But we don't know him. Paul wanted us to know God, not just about God. And Paul said that knowing God comes from spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Paul recorded one final prayer at the end of Colossians. This time, it's the prayer of a rather unknown person who was a friend of Paul: "Epaphras, a slave of Jesus Christ, from your city, also greets you. He always prays earnestly for you that you will grow to be spiritually mature and fully assured in all the will of God."<sup>1</sup>

This guy, Epaphras, who was from the city of Colossae, also prayed for the people in his city that they would grow to be spiritually mature and fully assured in all the will of God. Again – we are supposed to be people who know God's will – people who know what God wants. So, Paul and Epaphras, and many of the other apostles, all wrote about spiritual maturity. Throughout these prayers, we can see a glimpse of what spiritual maturity looks like.

We should have spiritual wisdom. We should be receiving revelations from God; in other words, God opening our eyes to reveal something to us – something new, or something that we previously didn't understand. We should be people who comprehend (that is, fully understand) the hope we've been called to. We should be people who know and understand the riches of our inheritance. We should experientially know that God's power is overwhelmingly great for us. We should fully understand and comprehend the incomprehensible love of Jesus. We should be filled with the fullness of God; in other words, all of God living in us. We should be filled with the experiential

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<sup>1</sup> Colossians 4:12

knowledge of God's will – knowing what God wants in all times, in all circumstances. We should have all understanding – knowing more than just the facts and the verses, but understanding what they mean and understanding what the spiritual reality is, and what all of our blessings are in the heavenly places.

And all of this should result in us living the kind of life God wants, producing the kind of fruit God wants, growing in knowing God personally, being strengthened with all power, and persevering through troubles with patience, joy, and thankfulness. As people who are born again – born of the Spirit, not born of the flesh – we should be spiritual people with spiritual wisdom, spiritual understanding, and spiritual maturity.

We should not be people who just quote Bible verses.

A lot of Christians quote Bible verses without understanding what those verses are saying. A lot of Christians take verses from the Bible out of context, they use them to remind themselves of God's promises, but they themselves don't even understand what those promises are or what those verses are saying!

Christians today talk in fluffy, non-sensical "Christianese" where they toss around words and phrases from the Bible, and act as if saying the right words is all that matters. But they don't actually understand what those words mean, and they don't comprehend the depth of what those verses are talking about. Christians today are comfortable not understanding the spiritual things the Bible says we should understand. Christians today are too comfortable quoting Bible verses and sounding spiritual when really, they have no idea what they're even saying. They use words that have no real tangible meaning to them. They don't understand what Paul was saying, and they don't understand what they're talking about when they use those same phrases.

Christians will say long, drawn-out, feel-good, poetic things that really have no substance to them at all. They use words that don't make sense. They use phrases that don't make sense. They don't really know what they're saying, and no one really gets any substantial help from it because it really doesn't have any meaning at all. But it feels good, it sounds good, and it uses words and phrases from the Bible, so it must be good... right?

Do you understand that when the apostles wrote these things, they did not intend it to be a feel-good, poetic, fluffy encouragement with no real tangible substance? They weren't trying to be poetic! They were trying to communicate something to you that you're supposed to understand and fully comprehend!

Building others up doesn't mean telling them non-sensical things that sound good and feel right. Building others up means telling them something that they can understand and comprehend. It has substance, and the truth

being communicated helps that person. But if the person doesn't understand any type of communicated thought, then you're just a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal!<sup>1</sup> You're benefiting no one.

If you have to use "Christianese" and fluffy poetic words from the Bible, and you can't put it into your own words in modern English and communicate a real thought in which the other person will understand the substance of what you're saying, then you don't actually know what you're talking about! Furthermore, you haven't built that person up, you haven't communicated truth, and you haven't helped anyone!

We're not supposed to be people who merely say, "God has given us every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places!" We're not supposed to be people who merely vomit up all the Bible verses we've read and say those words as if the words have some sort of magical power in them.

We're supposed to be people who know what those spiritual blessings are. We're supposed to be people who fully understand the hope we have and the inheritance we're receiving from God as his children. We're supposed to be people who are filled with the fullness of God, just like Jesus. In other words, we're supposed to be people who know what we're talking about. We're supposed to have spiritual wisdom. We're supposed to be people who understand – who understand what we're saying and thinking. And we're supposed to understand what the Bible is saying.

So, the question is: How do we get spiritual wisdom?

How do we come to know all our spiritual blessings? How do we comprehend the hope we're called to? How do we learn what our inheritance is? Or in other words, how do we understand the secret things of God that Paul said we're supposed to understand?

Paul told us! Paul told us where we can get this kind of wisdom and understanding:

"However, we speak wisdom to those who are mature. But this wisdom is not from this world or from the rulers of this world, who are passing away. We speak God's secret wisdom, which he has kept hidden. Before the world began, God planned this wisdom for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood it. If they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it is written in the Scriptures: 'No eye has ever seen this, and no ear has ever heard about it. No human heart has ever imagined what God has prepared for those who love him.' But God has revealed to us these things through the Spirit. The Spirit searches out all things, even the deep secrets of God. Who knows the thoughts that another person has? Only a person's spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 13:1

that lives within him knows his thoughts. It is the same with God. No one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we did not receive the spirit of the world, but we received the Spirit that is from God so that we can know all that God has freely given us.

“And we speak about these things, not with words taught us by human wisdom but with words taught us by the Spirit, *comparing spiritual things with spiritual*. A natural person does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God. That person thinks they are foolish and cannot understand them, because they can only be discerned by the Spirit. The spiritual person is able to discern all things, but no one can discern him. The Scripture says: ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been able to advise him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul was saying in this passage that those who are spiritual receive spiritual wisdom directly from the Spirit. That spiritual wisdom is God’s secret wisdom – his secret thoughts, his secret plans, things he has never told anyone about, things the spiritual rulers of this age didn’t understand, because if they had understood, they would never have crucified Jesus. No eye has seen these secret things, no ear has heard these secret things, but God reveals them to us through the Spirit.

So, Paul was saying we receive this wisdom and understanding through the Spirit because the Spirit knows the secret thoughts of God. Just like you can’t read my thoughts – no other person, not even my wife who knows me better than anyone else, can read my thoughts and know what I’m thinking. The only one who knows what I’m thinking is the spirit inside of me. Paul said it’s the same way with God – no one knows God’s secret thoughts, secret plans, and secret desires. No one knows the things that God has hidden deep inside his own mind.

But, God gave us his Spirit – that same Spirit that *does* know his secret thoughts, his secret plans, and his secret desires! So now, through the Spirit, we can know his secret thoughts, his secret plans, and his secret desires, and as Paul said, *we can know all that God has freely given us!* In other words, we can know all those spiritual blessings in the heavenly places! We can know what our inheritance is! We can know what God is giving us!

Paul continued, explaining that, because we learn these secret thoughts of God through the Spirit, we have an understanding and comprehension of things that no natural person can understand and comprehend. In other words, people who aren’t true Christians, who don’t have the true Spirit of God – they think it’s foolish; they think it’s stupid. They’re not able to understand it, and they will refuse to accept it. Only a spiritual person – someone born of the

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (EXB; italics NKJV)

Spirit, who has died with Jesus and risen with him into a new life – is able to understand it. And only a spiritual person can accept it.

He then summarized by quoting Isaiah – “Who has known the mind of the Lord?”<sup>1</sup> But then Paul gave an incredible answer: we have the mind of Christ. And because we have the mind of Christ, we *can* know the mind of the Lord.

In this section, Paul was providing the answer for how Christians are supposed to understand what it means to have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. He was explaining how we receive all those things we mentioned earlier – how we can have spiritual wisdom, how we receive revelations from God, how we comprehend the hope we’ve been called to, how we know and understand the riches of our inheritance, how we experientially know that God’s power is overwhelmingly great for us, how we fully understand and comprehend the incomprehensible love of Jesus, how we are filled with the fullness of God, how we are filled with the knowledge of God’s will, and how we can have all understanding.

It all comes through knowing the secret thoughts of God – the thoughts that only the Spirit within him can know! It comes because, as we become one with Jesus and one with the Father, we receive the mind of Christ! If we receive the mind of Christ, then we can know his thoughts. We gain his perspective. We understand his secrets. We know what he is giving us!

The Spirit of God knows all the depths of the secrets of God, and he makes those secrets available to us! The Spirit causes us to understand things. He reveals our inheritance to us in a way that we can comprehend it – not just talk about it. He opens our eyes to fathom the depths of what God is offering us.

We read the letters of Paul, and we see that he clearly had a deep understanding of spiritual things that we still don’t understand – even though we have his letters. He understood what God was doing with Israel.<sup>2</sup> He understood what God was doing with the Gentiles.<sup>3</sup> He understood what was coming in the future.<sup>4</sup> He understood what it means to be the bride of Christ.<sup>5</sup> He understood our inheritance – he understood what God is offering us.<sup>6</sup> He understood what’s going to happen when Jesus returns, and what kind of bodies we will have in heaven.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Isaiah 40:13

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 9-11

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Ephesians 2:11-22, 3:1-12

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-5, 4:1-4

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Ephesians 5:31-32

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 4:17-18; Ephesians 1:14

<sup>7</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:9; 2 Thessalonians 2

He understood it. It made sense to him.

In 1 Corinthians 2, he explained how he understood all this. And he was telling us that this kind of understanding is available to us, too! It wasn't just something Paul experienced as an apostle. It's something God offers to everyone who has his Spirit. We can only know what our spiritual blessings are if we have the Holy Spirit revealing these things to us.

This is what Paul called *spiritual wisdom*.

Paul said no eye has seen it, and no ear has heard it. That means no Christian book will teach you these things. No sermon is going to explain this to you. No pastor will help you understand. It's not something you can be taught by a person. It's not something you can learn through studying. It's something you can only have if the Spirit opens your eyes and gives it to you. The secret things of God are only available to us through the Spirit.

But so many Christians take the wrong approach.

Here's an example:

What is the most confusing book in the Bible that it seems like no one understands?

Isn't it the book of Revelation?

Revelation is this crazy roller-coaster story of a vision the apostle John had. He described scrolls being opened, horses being sent out on the earth, the sun becoming black, the moon turning to blood, earthquakes, locusts from the abyss, wars in heaven, trumpets and plagues, bowls and plagues, signs appearing in heaven, a beast rising from the sea, a beast rising from the earth, an image that can talk, the mark of the beast, a woman called the Whore of Babylon, and a beast she's riding. He described a rider on a white horse, a judgment day, a lake of fire, a second death, a new Jerusalem, and rivers of life. And so many other things.

It doesn't matter how many books you read about Revelation. It doesn't matter how many sermons you listen to. It doesn't matter how much research you do online. It seems like no one really understands what Revelation is talking about. Yet, at the end of the book it says, "Blessed is the one who obeys the words of prophecy in this book."<sup>1</sup>

You're expected to obey the book of Revelation! But, how are we supposed to obey the words of the book of Revelation when no one even *understands* the book of Revelation?

Scattered throughout the book of Revelation, John provided the answer. But most Christians don't understand what it means. Throughout the first few chapters of Revelation, John repeated a phrase over and over:

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 22:7

“Everyone who has ears should hear and obey what the Spirit says to the churches.”<sup>1</sup>

This is a phrase similar to what Jesus said when he told parables: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”<sup>2</sup>

John said it again later in Revelation: “If anyone has an ear, let him hear.”<sup>3</sup>

It’s a phrase that Jesus and John both used to say the same thing – “you need to pay close attention and understand what I’m saying.” In other words, it’s not supposed to be such a huge mystery. We’re expected to obey the book of Revelation because we’re expected to understand the book of Revelation.

John said some similar things elsewhere in Revelation...

We’ve all heard of the mark of the beast. We know that it says that everyone who accepts the mark of the beast will be thrown into the lake of fire. And countless Christian books, videos, movies, blogs, and sermons speculate and try to figure out what the mark of the beast could possibly be. But John said something so simple, and so often overlooked or misunderstood: “This calls for wisdom. Let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, which is the number of a man. Its number is 666.”<sup>4</sup>

Did you catch it? He said something similar about the beast that the prostitute is riding. He said, “You need a wise mind to understand this...”<sup>5</sup>

If you want to understand the book of Revelation, you need wisdom.

When he wrote about the prostitute herself, John said, “On her forehead a name was written that was a mystery...”<sup>6</sup>

When John said the name on her forehead is a *mystery*, he used the same word Paul used, which is translated as *secret*: “We speak God’s secret wisdom.”<sup>7</sup> That word *mystery* or *secret* is a word Paul used repeatedly throughout his letters whenever he would explain something that the Spirit had revealed to him. For example, in Romans, he revealed a mystery about how God allowed Israel to become hardened in order for him to be able to rescue the Gentiles.<sup>8</sup> In Ephesians, Paul revealed a mystery about how the Gentiles are now co-heirs with the Jews, belonging to the same body, and sharing together in the

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 2:7,11,17,29, 3:6,13,22

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 13:9,43; Mark 4:9 (ESV)

<sup>3</sup> Revelation 13:9

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 13:18

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 17:9

<sup>6</sup> Revelation 17:5

<sup>7</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 2:7

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Romans 11:25-36

promise.<sup>1</sup>

Also in Ephesians, Paul revealed another mystery. He revealed that marriage is about Christ and the Church <sup>2</sup> – and when Paul said that, he meant it in a much deeper way than just, “The Church is the Bride of Christ.” He was saying there’s a profound secret there that you need to understand. And in Colossians, Paul revealed yet another mystery. He said this is the mystery that was hidden from ages and generations, but now is made known to God’s holy people. He said this mystery is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”<sup>3</sup> We can expect to receive glory because we have Christ in us.

These are just a few examples. Paul used the word *mystery* or *secret* over and over again. Every time he used the word, he was telling his readers that what he was explaining is a deep secret of God that was revealed to him through the Spirit. It’s something that, even when Paul told us the mysteries, we won’t be able to understand it without the Spirit showing it to us as well. In other words, it’s not “surface-level.” They’re not just Bible verses we’re supposed to quote. It’s easy for us to say, “The Church is the Bride of Christ.” But do you understand what that means? That means the two become one flesh.<sup>4</sup> That means when he died, the Church died. When he rose, the Church rose. His blood pumps through our veins. His life is the life we’re living; it’s no longer us who live, it’s Christ living in us.<sup>5</sup> We became one with Jesus in the same way that he is one with the Father.<sup>6</sup> Yet all Paul said is, “This is a mystery. I’m talking about Christ and the Church.” And then he continued without further explanation. And so many Christians read it and they just see the surface-level, but they don’t see the depth of what Paul said.

These mysteries are things that we’re supposed to understand. We’re supposed to really get it. We’re supposed to comprehend the significance of what Paul was saying. That’s what a *mystery* is in the Bible. It’s something that requires spiritual wisdom – the kind of wisdom Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 2 – the kind of wisdom where we understand things through the Spirit that no natural person can understand or accept.

So, back to Revelation: When John said the name of the prostitute is a mystery, he was saying the same thing Paul was saying: this is a hidden thing that requires spiritual wisdom – not the world’s wisdom, but spiritual wisdom, where the Spirit tells us God’s secrets – his mysteries. The key to understanding the book of Revelation (and obeying it) is in having true spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Ephesians 3:4-6

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Ephesians 5:25-33

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Colossians 1:25-29

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Genesis 2:24

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Colossians 2:20

<sup>6</sup> Ref. John 17:20-23



wisdom, spiritual understanding, and knowing God's secret thoughts. When John said, "This calls for wisdom" or "you need a wise mind to understand this," he was referring to *spiritual wisdom*. He was referring to *spiritual understanding*. He was talking about the kind of wisdom and understanding we receive from the Spirit when we mature and become spiritual people.

The book of Revelation isn't supposed to be so confusing! John was saying you're supposed to understand it. If you have ears to hear, you will reach the point where you understand it. But you must have wisdom to understand it.

The book of Revelation is supposed to make sense. But we're supposed to have spiritual wisdom. Essentially, John was saying, "You won't understand this unless you are a mature, spiritual person – someone who thinks and acts like Jesus." Unfortunately, this is not the approach most Christians take. Instead of recognizing this, most Christians try to solve the riddles using their own human intellect. They come up with different math equations, they try to convert letters to numbers, they look at different symbology, they speculate about some future micro-chip... the list goes on and on and on.

Most Christians seem to mistake *wisdom* or *understanding* with *intellect*. This is not the kind of wisdom John was telling us to have.

Part of the problem in the Church today is that Christianity has been hijacked by intellectual scholars who tell us that we can only grow in understanding by following their intellectual scholarly methods. Christians have begun to believe that if they want to understand the Bible, they have to go to seminary, they have to take Bible classes, they have to read Christian books, and they have to be taught by people who know the ancient languages in which the Bible was written. Instead of learning the will of God (that is, what God wants) like Paul said we should be doing, Christians are learning human traditions, human doctrines, and human theology.

The intellectual educators in the world have hijacked Christianity to amass for themselves a large following of people.

For example, John Calvin was an intellectual, educated, secular scholar who then "became a Christian" and taught people that they need to read the Bible using the same methods that he used to study secular, non-spiritual literature. He made uneducated people dependent on him by telling them that he had the key to knowledge. He convinced people that his education made him capable of understanding things they couldn't understand. He deceived the masses. And people still assume he was right and follow his methods to this day.

He is merely one example.

The result of this is that the Church is now filled with Christians who

think that to understand the Bible, grow in wisdom, grow in understanding, and know God better, they have to learn and follow the intellectual methods of well-educated, scholarly men. This is the exact opposite of what Jesus said.

“In that same hour Jesus was full of joy in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the people who are wise and learned. But you have revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, because this is what you really wanted.’”<sup>1</sup>

Do you see what Jesus said? Do you realize that what Jesus just said is a direct contradiction of some of the theology and doctrine that those well-educated men teach? Jesus didn’t just say, “I praise you, Father, because you have revealed the truth to little children.” Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, because *you have hidden the truth from the people who are wise and learned.*” Jesus said that God the Father is actively hiding the truth from people who try to find it using worldly, scholarly, intellectual methods.

God himself is hiding the truth from them.

Let that sink in for a second.

Most Christians would have a problem with anyone saying that God would hide the truth from someone. They think that God would never do that! But Jesus himself said that God is the one hiding it!

This is the same thing Jesus said about why he spoke in parables. The Church tells us that Jesus spoke in parables as a method of helping people understand. But Jesus said the opposite:

“Jesus said, . . . I tell everything by using parables so that: ‘They will look and look but they will not learn. They will listen and listen, but they will not understand. Otherwise, they might return to me and be forgiven.’”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus spoke in parables specifically so that people *wouldn’t* understand!

Where does that verse fit in with the theology the Church teaches?

Jesus wants people who are all in. He wants people who are ready to drop everything and follow him completely – like his disciples did.<sup>3</sup> He wants loyalty. He wants faithfulness. He wants people who will obey his radical commands out of a deep love for him. He wants people who are reliable. That’s why he spoke in parables and then said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” He didn’t want everyone to understand! He only wanted those who would truly listen – those who would obey.

Jesus isn’t looking for people who are just trying to avoid Hell. Jesus isn’t looking for people who are just trying to get all their facts straight. Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:21

<sup>2</sup> Mark 4:11-12

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:20, 4:22, 9:9; Mark 1:18, 1:20, 2:14

isn't looking to reward the intellectuals for being smarter than everyone else. Those with a high IQ and a PhD are not going to be the only ones who are capable of calculating the mark of the beast, understanding all our spiritual blessings, comprehending the love of Christ, knowing our inheritance as saints, and unraveling the secrets of God.

Their wisdom is not what God values. When Paul wrote about the wisdom we receive through the Spirit, he also said, "It is written in the Scriptures: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; And I will bring to nothing the intelligence of the intelligent.' Where is the wise person? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this world? God has made the wisdom of the world foolish. God wisely determined that the world would not know God through its own wisdom... Brothers and sisters, look at what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many of you had great influence. Not many of you were of high social status. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is unimportant and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. God did this so that no one can brag in his presence. Because of God you are united with Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God."<sup>1</sup>

According to Jesus, and according to Paul, God did not create a spiritual reality in which the truth can be found through intelligence, education, scholarship, seminaries, or anything else that the world considers important. God hides the truth from those who try to find the truth through those means. Jesus didn't come to call the wise and intelligent, he came to destroy the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent. The wisdom of this world is foolishness.

Why have we allowed the intellectual educated men to hijack Christianity?

Jesus changed the entire world with a group of fishermen, tax collectors, and zealots. When Peter and John stood on trial, the leaders were amazed because they realized that Peter and John were just common, uneducated men.<sup>2</sup> True spiritual wisdom is not something we receive through education, intelligence, or hermeneutics. If that is how you're searching for understanding, Jesus and Paul both said that God himself will hide the truth from you.

If you're doing something that is making God hide the truth from you, you can be sure that you will never find the truth unless you change!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:19-30

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Acts 4:13

No one will ever understand the mark of the beast, the Whore of Babylon, what the beast is, or how to obey the book of Revelation by trying to solve it like some human puzzle. No one will ever understand our spiritual blessings in the heavenly places, the hope we're called to, our inheritance, God's power, or God's will by taking classes, reading books, listening to sermons, going to seminary, or studying theology.

True spiritual wisdom only comes through knowing the secret thoughts of God. True understanding only comes through the Spirit. Unless God shows you, you will never figure it out – even if you think you did.

It's possible to understand our spiritual blessings. It's possible to fully comprehend the hope we're called to. It's possible to know what our inheritance is. It's possible to understand the book of Revelation and know what the mark of the beast is and who the prostitute is. All this understanding, and all this wisdom is available to us through the Spirit of God. But we need to know how to learn from the Spirit. We need to know how to become people who receive this kind of wisdom and understanding from God's Spirit.

Not everyone who thinks they're a Christian is going to receive it. It's only for those who are spiritual. And right after Paul told the Corinthians about receiving spiritual wisdom through the Spirit, he told them that they were not spiritual.<sup>1</sup> So, even though the Corinthians were Christians, they were not receiving this spiritual wisdom. The entire book of 1 Corinthians was telling them how they should change so they could start receiving that kind of wisdom.

If we want to receive spiritual wisdom, we need to know what the Bible says about how to begin receiving spiritual wisdom. We'll look at what the Bible says about that in the next chapter.

For now, go back to Paul's prayers that we read at the beginning of the chapter.<sup>2</sup> Look at what Paul prayed for the Ephesians, the Colossians, and the other prayers recorded throughout the New Testament. He prayed that they would grow in the knowledge of God. He prayed that they would know God's will. He prayed that they would have all spiritual wisdom and all spiritual understanding. He prayed that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened. He prayed that they would know all the spiritual blessings in the heavenly places.

He prayed that they would mature.

Make these your prayers.

Look at what Paul prayed in these passages (and others) and begin to

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Ephesians 1:16-19, 3:16-19; Colossians 1:9-14, 4:12

## DEAD CHURCH

pray the same thing. Pray for yourself, but not just for yourself – that’s not love. Pray for others. Pray for other brothers and sisters. Pray for anyone you know. Pray that the Body of Christ would grow into this kind of maturity. Make this your daily prayer. Ask and keep asking.<sup>1</sup>

Let this become the prayer that the entire Body of Christ begins to ask God. And may his Body grow!

*Father, I ask for anyone reading this chapter, for anyone who truly wants to follow you, for anyone who is your child, I ask that the eyes of their hearts would be enlightened, that you would give them spiritual wisdom and understanding. I ask that your Body would grow... that your Body would grow out of the slumber it’s been in for so many years, and that it would step into maturity. That she would mature into the image of Christ and begin to look like him, and act like him, and think like him. Father, let your children begin to see and understand the truth. Give spiritual wisdom and understanding to your children. Teach them the way they should walk so they will know this spiritual wisdom. Show them the way to live. Show them what they must do to live in it, and teach them things that no natural person would accept. Let your Body grow and mature into the image of Christ so that it’s no longer tossed around by all these false teachers, all these educated men, so that it can stand firm, not tossed about by every new wave of teaching. Let your Body begin to look like Jesus. Let your Body begin to live like Jesus and act like Jesus so that it is you living in us. Your blood in our veins; your life in us. Us joined to you as the Bride of Christ, becoming one flesh with you – one with you the way that you are one with the Father. Part of your family. Let this happen. Let us see it happen in our generation. Let your Kingdom come on earth, and let what you want be done on earth just like it is in heaven. Let us see your Kingdom, Father. Send your Spirit. Teach us through your Spirit. And grow your Body into what you intended, and not some religion. In Jesus’ name I ask.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Luke 11:9-13

# Chapter 21

## Spiritual Milk, Solid Food, Wisdom... We've Got It All Wrong

**H**ow do we learn from the Spirit? How do we grow in understanding and wisdom? How do we reach the point where the Spirit teaches us?

As we've been talking about in the last few chapters, Jesus said, "Those who know my commands and obey them are the ones who love me, and my Father will love those who love me. I will love them and will reveal myself to them."<sup>1</sup>

He said again, "If people love me, they will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus gave a conditional promise – if you obey him, then he will love you, the Father will love you, he will reveal himself to you, and both he and the Father will come to you and make their home with you. When they come make their home with you, they do this through the Spirit – the same Spirit that searches out the secret thoughts of God. In this section, Jesus made it clear that he was talking about the Spirit. He said, "If you love me, you will obey my commands. I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it does not see him or know him. But you know him, because he lives with you and he will be in you."<sup>3</sup>

So, when Jesus said that he will reveal himself to us and make his home with us if we obey his commands, he was saying that he will send the Spirit to those who obey his commands.

Remember what we saw in the last chapter. Paul told the Corinthians that the Spirit reveals secret things to us that a natural person cannot accept.<sup>4</sup> He even told the Corinthians that because they weren't spiritual (even though they were Christians!), he couldn't tell them the things that the Spirit was telling him – because they weren't ready for it.<sup>5</sup> They still needed milk.

Jesus was saying the same thing here. He said that the world cannot

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<sup>1</sup> John 14:21

<sup>2</sup> John 14:23

<sup>3</sup> John 14:15-17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

accept the Spirit of truth. Natural people cannot accept the Spirit of truth. They won't understand it; they won't accept it; they'll reject it. Because they can't see him, they don't know him. Jesus also told his disciples, "I still have many more things to say to you, but they are too much for you now. But when the Spirit of truth comes, he will lead you into all truth."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was saying the same thing Paul said. He had more he wanted to teach his disciples, but he couldn't tell them yet because it was too much for them – they weren't spiritual – they needed the Holy Spirit. They needed to become spiritual people.

Paul said the Spirit is our source of wisdom. The Spirit reveals to us the secret thoughts of God – the secret thoughts of God that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and the spiritual rulers of this age did not understand, or they would not have crucified Jesus. They didn't realize all that God was going to freely give us, and if they had, they would not have fallen into the trap God set for them. And Paul was telling us that we can come to understand those things through the Spirit. And Jesus was telling us the same thing. He said the Spirit will lead us into *all* truth. He also said, "But the Helper will teach you everything and will remind you of all that I told you. This Helper is the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name."<sup>2</sup>

The Holy Spirit is sent to us to be our Teacher. He is sent to us to lead us into *all* truth – not just some of it. Jesus said the Spirit will teach us *everything* – not just some things. No wonder Paul said the Spirit reveals the thoughts of God and shows us secret things that no natural person can accept! No wonder Paul prayed so often for the early Christians to have this spiritual wisdom so they could understand and comprehend all the blessings, all the power, all the inheritance, and all the will of God! The Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth.

Jesus promised that the Spirit will be our Teacher. He promised that the Spirit will teach us everything. He directly said that he had more he wanted to teach, but his disciples weren't ready yet – so the Spirit would come and would reveal those things to them.

That promise is also available for us.

We can receive the Spirit. We can become one with God in the same way that Jesus was one with God.<sup>3</sup> We can be taught by the Spirit and come to a full understanding of the truth. We can be taught *everything!*

Think about that. We can be taught everything. We are supposed to reach the point where we understand it all. So many Christians use the excuse that no one is perfect; no one understands everything; no one's got it all right...

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<sup>1</sup> John 16:12-13

<sup>2</sup> John 14:26

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 17:20-23

That's not biblical. We are supposed to be people who arrive at a knowledge of the truth. We're not supposed to be people who are constantly learning and never arriving – Paul said that's what apostasy looks like: People will never arrive at a knowledge of the truth.<sup>1</sup> But, spiritual people *will* arrive at a knowledge of the truth. They will not be people who are constantly learning; they will not be people who never get it all right. That is an unbiblical idea the Church has brainwashed Christians with, so they don't accept the things the Bible says. They don't accept that Christians can (and should) arrive at a full knowledge of the truth because they don't experience it. They don't experience it because they are still natural people, and natural people cannot accept what the Spirit says because natural people don't experience it – they don't see him, they don't know him.<sup>2</sup> That's what Jesus said, and that's what Paul said.

Why is this something Christians aren't experiencing? Because Jesus didn't say, "I will come make my home with everyone who believes in me." He said, "I will come make my home with everyone who obeys me."

If we want to be taught by the Spirit – if we want to be led into all truth – if we want to be taught everything and have all wisdom and understanding and knowledge, then we must be people who obey the commands of Jesus!

These promises are not for people who merely call themselves Christians and say they believe in Jesus. These promises are not for people who merely call Jesus "Lord."<sup>3</sup> These promises are for those who truly love Jesus. And only those who obey him actually love him. So, these promises are only for those who obey the commands of Jesus.

If you want to begin learning from the Spirit of God and grow in wisdom, understanding, and knowledge, then you must start doing the things Jesus said to do. This is something we can see all throughout the New Testament:

"So Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, 'If you continue to obey my teaching, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'"<sup>4</sup>

This is one of those verses most Christians are familiar with – "the truth will set you free." But Jesus had a condition attached to this promise! "If you continue to obey my teaching" or in some translations, "if you abide in my word." Jesus was saying, "Those who obey me – those who follow me and do what I teach, *they* are the ones who are truly my disciples. And *they* are the ones who will learn the truth, and when they learn the truth, *they* are the ones who will be set free by the truth."

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:7

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 14:15-17; 1 Corinthians 2:14, 3:1-4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46

<sup>4</sup> John 8:31-32



It all comes down to obedience.

Only those who obey will know the truth. And only those who obey will be set free by the truth. Knowing the truth is only for those who obey.

This is similar to how Jesus would end many of his parables by saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”<sup>1</sup> Jesus wasn’t trying to make everyone understand. He wanted to find the people who will truly listen – those who would hear him and do what he said to do. Jesus is looking for the people who will drop their nets and obey.<sup>2</sup> He’s looking for the people who are all in. He’s looking for the people who are ready to accept his teaching and are ready to accept the cost. Those are the ones who will understand his parables, those are the ones who will receive his Spirit, and those are the ones who will know the truth and be set free.

As we’ve seen in this book, Jesus’ commands are to love one another.<sup>3</sup> It’s not just worldly love where we have feelings and do little nice things here or there. He wants us to love with the same kind of love that he had for us. He said, “This is my command: Love each other as I have loved you.”<sup>4</sup>

He wants us loving with a radical love where we completely stop looking out for what’s good for ourselves, and we live our lives consumed with what is best for one another. He wants us living a life where we build our lives around others and make sure that the needs of others are always being met. He wants us to stop living cushy American lives, and stop pursuing the comforts and pleasures of this life, and stop accumulating wealth and possessions, and stop buying stuff for ourselves, and stop living our lives just to have fun, and instead build our lives entirely around the Kingdom of God – loving others, meeting their needs, selling our possessions, and helping others survive.

He wants us to follow his example – to make ourselves poor so that others can be made rich.<sup>5</sup> He wants us to lay down our lives, and die.<sup>6</sup> He wants us to humble ourselves and make ourselves nothing – make ourselves slaves.

And if we do, then he will reveal himself to us. If we do, then he and the Father will come make their homes with us. If we do, then we will know the truth, and the truth will set us free. If we do, then the Spirit will teach us everything. According to what Jesus said, if we want to grow in spiritual

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:9, 13:43; Mark 4:9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:20, 4:22; Mark 1:18, 1:20; Luke 5:11

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 13:34, 15:12, 15:17; Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35; Romans 5:8, 12:9-21, 13:8-10; 1 Corinthians 10:24; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Galatians 5:13-15, 6:8-10; Ephesians 3:17, 4:28, 5:1-2; Philippians 2:1-8; Titus 3:14; Hebrews 13:1-3, 13:16; James 2:12-17, 5:1-5; 1 Peter 1:22, 4:8-11; 1 John 2:9-11, 3:10-18, 4:7-21; 3 John 5-8

<sup>4</sup> John 15:12

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:9

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Matthew 20:26-28; Mark 10:42-45; John 13:12-17; Philippians 2:1-8

wisdom and understanding, then we must live a life defined by obeying his radical and costly commands. If we obey his commands, then we will receive the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit will begin teaching us the secrets of God. But only if we obey.

In the New Testament, we can see Paul as such a clear example of this radical love that Jesus commanded. Paul worked harder than any of the other apostles to help as many people as possible and get the Good News to as many people as he could without letting anything get in the way.<sup>1</sup> As an apostle, he had the right to accept money from people,<sup>2</sup> but he refused because he saw that it was better for them if he didn't give them any reason to think he might be taking advantage of them. So instead of accepting money, he preached full-time and also worked with his hands so as to not be a burden on anyone, and so he would be able to give to those in need.<sup>3</sup>

He was stoned by the people in one city and left for dead outside the city walls.<sup>4</sup> But he got back up and went back into the city. He was often in danger of being killed because he wanted people to know Jesus and have life more than he wanted to hold onto his own life.<sup>5</sup> He was imprisoned, insulted, beaten, and shipwrecked. He wrote to Christians, telling them, "Your love must be unhypocritical... Be devoted to each other like brothers and sisters. Outdo one another in showing honor... Share with God's people who need help. Bring strangers in need into your homes. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them... associate with the lowly... Repay no one evil for evil."<sup>6</sup>

He wrote to the Corinthians, essentially saying, "You want all these spiritual gifts? Great! But the best way of all is to love one another! Love is better than prophesy. Love is better than knowledge. Love is better than speaking in tongues."<sup>7</sup> He told them that even with the spiritual gifts, they should want the gifts that are better for everyone else – the gifts that they can use to help others; not the gifts that are good only for themselves – because of love!

He wrote to the Philippians, telling them to think and act like Jesus, who was in Heaven, and was in the form of God himself, but instead of holding onto that for himself, he emptied himself, he made himself nothing, he became a servant, he humbled himself, and he died.<sup>8</sup> Why? For others. Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 9, 15:10; 1 Thessalonians 2:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 9, 10:31-11:1; Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 14:19-20; 2 Corinthians 11:25

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 1:8-10, 4:7-12, 6:9, 11:23-33

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:9-17

<sup>7</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 12-14

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Philippians 2:1-8

told them, “I want to share in his sufferings and become like him in his death... All of us who are spiritually mature should think this way, too.”<sup>1</sup>

He taught, “Christ died for all so that those who live would no longer live for themselves, but for him who died for them and was raised from the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

And he himself demonstrated what this meant over and over, saying, “I am not trying to do what is good for me but what is good for most people so they can be saved. Imitate me as I imitate Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul lived a life of love. He saw the love of Christ and he imitated it. He lived his life obeying the commands of Jesus. Is it any wonder then that he was taught by the Holy Spirit, grew in maturity, learned God’s secrets, revealed things that would happen in the future, and understood our spiritual blessings and inheritance?

Paul wrote to the Galatians, telling them that when God first called him, he didn’t go to any man to learn the truth. He didn’t go to some teacher to be taught the Gospel. He went to Arabia and later to Damascus – he went to a completely different place than where the other apostles were. He said, “Brothers and sisters, I want you to know that the Good News I preached to you was not made up by human beings. I did not get it from a human source, nor did anyone teach it to me, but by a revelation from Jesus Christ... When God called me, I did not get advice or help from any person.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, even though he hadn’t been taught by any person, when he finally did meet with the apostles to make sure he was preaching the same thing as them, he said, “Those leaders who seemed to be important did not change the Good News that I preach... The only thing they asked us was to remember to help the poor – something I really wanted to do.”<sup>5</sup>

Paul received everything he taught – including the Gospel itself – not from men, but from the Holy Spirit.

Why? Because as soon as God called him, he gave his life to Jesus – not in the modern sense of *saying a prayer* and *going to church*, but in the radical way that Jesus taught – he gave up everything and lived the rest of his entire life for the good of others.

As we saw in the last chapter, Paul said that the Holy Spirit reveals the secret thoughts of God.<sup>6</sup> The word he used, which is translated *secret*, is the same word that’s often translated *mystery*. And all throughout Paul’s letters, he

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 3:10,15

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>3</sup> 1 Corinthians 10:33-11:1

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 1:11-12, 16

<sup>5</sup> Galatians 2:6, 10

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

revealed mysteries that the Spirit had taught him<sup>1</sup> – mysteries that many Christians still don't understand even though Paul told us! (Because, as Paul said, natural people cannot understand spiritual secrets of God.) Paul was clearly someone who understood the mysterious, secret thoughts of God; and he explained how others can have the same experience he had:

“I want you to know how hard I work for you, those in Laodicea, and others who have never seen my face in the flesh. I want their hearts to be strengthened and joined together with love so that they may be rich in their understanding. This leads to their knowing fully God's secret, that is, Christ himself. In him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul wanted them to be joined together with love *so that* they would be rich in understanding, and *so that* they would fully know God's secret.

According to Paul, you don't grow in wisdom and understanding by studying, going to seminary, listening to sermons, or reading books. You become rich in understanding by living a life defined by God's radical love. Paul was saying the same thing Jesus said! If you obey the commands of Jesus – the commands to live a life of radical love – then Jesus and the Father will come make their home in your heart through the Spirit, you will be one with God in the same way that Jesus is one with God, and the Spirit will teach you everything, leading you into all truth.

Paul said it again when he wrote to Philemon: “I always thank my God when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about the love you have for all God's holy people and the faith you have in the Lord Jesus. I pray that the fellowship of your faith may empower you to understand every blessing we have in Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Okay, so this one is a little bit more confusing because the modern Church has redefined the word *fellowship*. But Paul was saying the same thing he said to the Colossians. The word Paul used for *fellowship* is the Greek word *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*). We often think of *fellowship* as *talking to each other about God*. But the Greek word *koinonia* actually means *sharing everything in common*. It's exactly what we see the early church doing in the book of Acts<sup>4</sup> – and the word *fellowship* there is also the word *koinonia*!<sup>5</sup>

*Koinonia* is what true love is – sharing everything in common, selling your possessions, looking out for the needs of others, and not considering anything to belong to yourself. That's how *koinonia* was described in Acts, that's what the word *koinonia* means, and that's what Paul was saying to

<sup>1</sup> Ref. Romans 11:25-36; Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 1:9, 3:3-6, 5:32

<sup>2</sup> Colossians 2:1-3

<sup>3</sup> Philemon 4-6

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Acts 2:42

Philemon.

Paul was saying to Philemon, “I hear about your love – your radical love. And I pray that as you share everything you have in common with your brothers and sisters and you don’t hold onto anything as belonging to yourself, because of your faith and fidelity to Jesus, I pray that that love will empower you to understand every blessing we have in Christ!”

Paul prayed that Philemon’s love – his *koinonia* – would empower him to understand every blessing we have in Christ.

There it is again – just like we saw in the last chapter – every blessing, every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.<sup>1</sup>

How do we understand what it means to have every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places? By love. By living in true, radical, biblical love where we share everything with one another and stop looking out for ourselves. When we live this way, the Spirit will teach us everything, leading us into all truth, and showing us all that God has for us as his holy people.

It’s an incredible promise. But it’s all dependent on love. If you do not live the life of love that Jesus and the apostles all taught, you will never experience this kind of life. We can see this same thing in 1 John. When John wrote 1 John, he was warning us about all the false teachers that are out there, teaching all the wrong things. He warned that they are the antichrist.<sup>2</sup> A lot of Christians seem to miss that and not realize the significance of what he said there, but that’s what he said – false teachers are the antichrist!

That alone is worth thinking about.

But after he said that, he said, “I am writing these things about those people who are leading you astray. As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, so you do not need any other teacher. His anointing teaches you about everything, and it is true, not false.”<sup>3</sup>

John was saying – “Stop turning to men to teach you! You don’t need men to teach you! If you keep thinking you need men to teach you, you’re going to be led astray because so many false teachers are out there now. They are the antichrist! You have no need to even listen to them! You have God’s anointing – the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit teaches you everything – and it’s true, not false. So, you don’t need to listen to those false teachers. You can receive everything you need directly from the Spirit.”

We don’t need to listen to men because we can be taught directly by the Spirit. But, John didn’t say that this is for everyone. Right before he said this, he told us how to receive the Spirit. He said, “As for you be sure you

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Ephesians 1:3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:26-27

abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning. If you abide in what you heard from the beginning, you will also abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is the promise which he himself promised to us – eternal life.”<sup>1</sup>

John was saying that if you abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father and receive eternal life. It’s another one of those conditional promises. Jesus is the Son. And Jesus told us that if we abide in him, then he will abide in us – through the Holy Spirit.<sup>2</sup> So, if we want the Spirit, we need to abide in the Son. And John said that the way to do that is to abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning.

If you started at the beginning of this book and have been reading through, you probably remember that John told us in the next chapter what that “teaching you heard from the beginning” is:

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>3</sup>

So, if you abide in the teaching you heard from the beginning, which is love, then you will abide in the Son. And, if you abide in the Son, then he will abide in you. It’s that same message: if you want to receive the Holy Spirit, you need to begin obeying God’s commands – his commands to love one another. John said this directly: “This is what God commands: that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and that we love each other, just as he commanded. The people who obey God’s commands abide in God, and God abides in them. We know that God abides in us by the Spirit God gave us.”<sup>4</sup>

“...if we love each other, God abides in us...”<sup>5</sup>

“God is love. Those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”<sup>6</sup>

So, now we see the full picture of what John said: If we abide in love – loving one another with the same kind of radical love with which Jesus loved us, then we abide in Jesus and in the Father, and if we abide in him, then he abides in us through the Holy Spirit – “the anointing.” And the Holy Spirit will teach us everything, so we don’t have any need for any man to teach us anymore. And therefore, we can keep ourselves from being deceived and led astray by the antichrist (which is, the false teachers that have popped up in the Church).

John was saying the same thing Jesus said and the same thing Paul said: if you obey the commands of God, living a life of radical love, then you will

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:24-25

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 15:4

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:11

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 3:23-24

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 4:12

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 4:16

begin to learn true wisdom and understanding from the Spirit. Why? Because wisdom and understanding only come from the Spirit, and the Spirit is only given to those who obey the commands of Jesus. John said the same thing Jesus said – the Holy Spirit will teach us everything! That’s also the same kind of wisdom Paul said spiritual people will receive from the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit knows everything – including the deep secrets of God – and the Holy Spirit will reveal those secrets to us.

But it’s all contingent on obeying Jesus and living in his radical love. If you live in love, the Holy Spirit will teach you everything, and you will have no need for a man to teach you.

Paul said the same thing when he wrote to the Ephesians:

“We must become like a mature person, growing until we become like Christ and have his perfection. Then we will no longer be babies. We will not be tossed about like a ship that the waves carry one way and then another. We will not be carried along by every wind of teaching we hear from people who are trying to fool us. They scheme and try any kind of trick to fool people into following false teaching. Rather, living out the truth with love, we will grow up in every way into Christ, who is the head, through whom all the parts of the body are joined and held together. Each part does its own work to make the whole body grow and to build itself up in love.”<sup>1</sup>

There’s a lot packed into this passage, and many things that we could say about it. But look at what Paul said it means to mature: Paul said we should become like Christ and have his perfection. This is the same thing Jesus taught. He said the student should become like his teacher.<sup>2</sup> He said we should be one with God in the same way that he was one with God.<sup>3</sup> He said we should do all the same things he did and even greater things.<sup>4</sup> He said we should be perfect, just like our Father in heaven is perfect.<sup>5</sup>

We’re supposed to look like Jesus. We’re supposed to mature into his image. We’re supposed to reach the point where we literally look like Jesus did – the same wisdom, the same understanding, the same Spirit, the same power, and the same love. We see this in the early Church in Acts. It’s what every Christian is supposed to look like.

Paul also said we should no longer be babies. This is the same thing he said to the Corinthians. Babies need milk; they’re not ready for solid food. They need to grow up. They need to mature – not just maturing like normal humans mature as they grow up where we figure out how to be adults and live

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesians 4:13-16

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:24-25; Luke 6:40

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 17:20-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. John 14:12-14

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:48

life as adults. We're supposed to mature into the image of Christ – looking like him and having his perfection.

Paul said we should not be tossed about with every new false teaching. This is the same thing John said! If we're being taught by the Holy Spirit, then the antichrist can't touch us. John said the antichrist is all the false teachers and false brothers who are trying to deceive us.<sup>1</sup> But if we are mature, and we are receiving wisdom and understanding from the Spirit and not even listening to what those false teachers are saying, then we won't be tossed about by what they say. We will only be learning from the Spirit. And we can learn *everything* from the Spirit, so there's no need to go to those false teachers in the first place!

Paul said we should live out the truth with love in order to grow up into Christ.

It's worth mentioning here that some translations say, "Speaking the truth in love." However, that's not an accurate translation. The Greek more accurately says something along the lines of "truthing" in love or *being true in love*. The implication being that it's your whole life – not just what you're saying. Paul was saying that to grow up into Christ, we need to be living out the truth with love. And he also added that we should each do our own part to make the *whole body* grow and be built up in love. Again – love. We grow by loving, and the whole body grows by all its members loving one another. Love is the key to maturing. Not books. Not sermons. Not teaching or preaching. Not prayer. Not worship. Not studying the Bible.

Love.

That's the same thing Jesus said, the same thing John said, and the same thing we've already seen that Paul said elsewhere. Paul was saying that for us to grow and mature, we need to live in love – we should live out the truth in love, and we should each do our part to build up the whole body with love. And the result of maturing through love is that we will look like Jesus and have his perfection, we will no longer be babies, and we won't be tossed around by all the false teaching because we'll be filled with the Spirit of Christ and will have his understanding, his wisdom, and his knowledge.

Maturing into the image of Christ is entirely dependent on love. Do you live in love? Do you obey the commands of Jesus? Do you look out for the interests of others above your own? Do you humble yourself and make yourself a slave of all? Do you live in a kind of love that's foreign to unbelievers – that's foreign to anyone else in the world? We're not talking about people who do nice things. We're not talking about being kind to one another. Kindness is part of it, but it's not just kindness. We're talking about the kind

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29



of love where you radically look out for others above yourself. For example, if you see a brother or sister who's about to lose their home because they can't pay rent, and you also owe rent, you pay theirs before you pay your own. You look out for their needs first. You share everything in common.<sup>1</sup> You don't consider anything at all as belonging to yourself.

This is a radical kind of love that we're called to live in!

It's not about just being nice, just being kind and just getting along. If it's not this kind of radical love, then it's not the right kind of love, and it's not the kind of love that will result in you maturing. You're not called to love like the world loves; you're called to the same kind of love Jesus had, where he humbled himself, made himself a slave of everyone else, and only did what was best for them, even to the point of death.<sup>2</sup> If it's not that kind of love, it's not the right kind of love.

If you want to mature into the image of Jesus, you must first start by living like Jesus. If you want spiritual wisdom and understanding, you must live a life of radical love. If you want to know God's secrets, you must prove yourself trustworthy by living as he lives. If you want the Spirit to teach you so that you have no need for a man to teach you, you must first begin to live in love. It all comes down to love. It all comes down to obeying and doing what Jesus taught, and what Jesus showed us in his own life.

Hebrews said the same thing: "We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are so slow to understand. By now you should be teachers, but you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of God's message. You still need milk. You are not ready for solid food. Anyone who lives on milk is still a baby and is inexperienced with the message about righteousness. But solid food is for those who are mature, who through practice have trained their senses to know the difference between good and evil."<sup>3</sup>

The writer of Hebrews was saying, "It's hard for us to even explain to you what we're trying to explain because you're so slow to understand. You should be teaching others by now, but you can't because you still need teachers for yourself! You're immature! You're inexperienced! Mature people grow through practice – through doing."

He was saying the same thing here that we saw John and Paul saying elsewhere: You don't need teachers. You should mature. Teachers are only for giving milk. They give the basics. You're supposed to move past that stage and become a teacher yourself. You should be growing and maturing through

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:44-46, 4:32-35

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Philippians 2:1-8

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 5:11-14

practice – through doing what Jesus taught.

If you're a Christian who keeps turning to teachers, to preachers, to sermons, and to books in order to learn, the writer of Hebrews said you're slow to understand. He called you a baby. That means you're not maturing. You're not looking like Jesus. You're not growing up. He referred to *milk* and *solid food*. He was rebuking them that they still needed milk – the basic principles of God's message. Furthermore, he outlined what *milk* is in the very next section:

“Therefore let us move forward to maturity. Let us leave behind the elementary teaching we learned about Christ. We should not again start teaching about repentance from dead works and about faith in God. We should not return to the teaching about baptisms, about laying on of hands, about the raising of the dead and eternal judgment.”<sup>1</sup>

He was saying that we need to move on from milk. We're not supposed to keep consuming milk our entire lives. That's a sign of immaturity. And he said *milk* is the elementary teaching about Christ: repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, the raising of the dead, and eternal judgment. He told them to leave those things behind and stop going over it again and again and again.

This is the opposite of what the Church does today!

Today Christians meet on Sundays at their church every single Sunday, week after week after week, year after year after year, to hear a message on the basic principles of the Gospel – the elementary teaching about Christ. In fact, I've heard many preachers teach that we should *never* move on from the basic teachings of the Gospel.

They are literally teaching the exact opposite of what the Bible directly says.

Today, every Christian still feels like they need a teacher. One of the most common things Christians will say is, “God gives the gift of teaching, and he gives the gift of teachers. So, teachers are important.” Yes, God gives teachers, but teachers aren't given to us for the reasons modern Christians think. The writer of Hebrews explained what teachers are for: teachers are for giving milk. They teach the basic principles to unspiritual people who still live like normal human beings. They are for people who still live according to the flesh – who do not walk by the Spirit.

When God gives teachers to his people, it's not so they can sit under a teacher for the rest of their lives. It's not so they can listen to sermon after sermon after sermon. Hebrews said you start with teachers, they give you the milk you need to get started, and then you move on to solid food. You yourself should become a teacher. You shouldn't keep going back to teachers. If you

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 6:1-2

do, you're not maturing.

This is the same thing John said. You don't need anyone to teach you because you have God's anointing, and his anointing will teach you everything.

A lot of Christians seem to think John meant, "Keep listening to sermons, keep listening to teaching, keep reading books, but remember that the Holy Spirit is the one who is *really* teaching you through that man." That doesn't make any sense! Look at the context!<sup>1</sup> John was warning us about the antichrist! Paul called them servants of Satan! The Holy Spirit is not going to speak to you through the mouth of the antichrist!

The only way John's warning makes any sense is if John was saying, "Do not keep listening to what those people have to say! You have no need to even listen to them!"

God gives teachers, yes. But they're not for you to keep listening to for the rest of your life. Hebrews told us why God gives teachers. They're for the immature! They're for the people who don't have God's anointing teaching them everything yet, because they haven't started to obey yet! They still need someone to teach them the basic principles of God's message – the commands of Jesus! They haven't matured through practice yet.

Teachers are only for babies. They're for people who still need milk. They're for people who can't handle solid food. You're not supposed to keep listening to sermon after sermon after sermon. You're not supposed to read book after book after book. You're supposed to be taught by God. You're supposed to have the Holy Spirit teaching you everything! You're supposed to be learning the deep secrets of God that no eye has seen and no ear has heard and no tongue can express! That means you can't get it from a teacher; you have to receive it from the Holy Spirit.

But you can only be taught by the Spirit if you *have* the Spirit. And the Spirit is only given to those who obey the commands of God. Which is why God gives teachers – to teach people the basic principle of God's message:

**Repentance** (or, changing the way you live)

**Faith** (or fidelity, loyalty, and faithfulness)

**Baptism** (following Jesus into death and rising with him into a new life)

**Laying on of hands** (I'll admit – I'm still learning this one)

**The raising of the dead and eternal judgment** (you will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for everything you did – and the Bible says you will be judged based on your actions)

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29

– not your beliefs.)<sup>1</sup>

That's what teachers are for – to teach the basic principles. That's what we've been teaching throughout *Dead Church*. Teachers teach the basic principles *so that* you can begin to obey, *so that* you can receive the Holy Spirit, *so that* you can be taught by the Holy Spirit, *so that* you won't need to continue following men, *so that* you won't be deceived by the antichrist.

If you keep listening to sermon after sermon, and reading book after book, for the rest of your life, it shows one thing: you're not growing up into the image of Christ. You're slow to understand. You're still a baby. You're still able to be tossed about. You still might be led astray by the antichrist.

You need to move on to solid food. Hebrews said solid food is for those who are mature, who *through practice* have trained their senses to know the difference between good and evil. The writer of Hebrews was saying the same thing we see everywhere else: you mature by *doing*, not by sitting under teachers. You get spiritual wisdom by obeying what Jesus taught, not by listening to sermons.

“This is the teaching you have heard from the beginning: We must love each other.”<sup>2</sup>

The teaching being taught by true teachers from God is this: We must love one another. If you live in that teaching, and you love with God's radical love, then you abide in God and God abides in you through the Spirit, and the Spirit teaches you everything else you need to know; therefore, you have no more need for men to teach you, but instead you can become a teacher because you have matured. How did you mature? By living in love.

When you begin to live in true radical love, you begin to consume solid food – because when you begin to live in true radical love, you're obeying the commands of Jesus, and Jesus makes his home with you through the Spirit, and the Spirit begins to reveal the secret thoughts of God to you. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about learning wisdom through the Spirit, learning the secret thoughts of God, and being spiritual, he also used the analogy of milk verses solid food.

He said, “Brothers and sisters, in the past I could not talk to you as I talk to spiritual people. I had to talk to you as I would to unspiritual people – babies in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, because you were not yet able to take solid food. And even now you are not ready. You are still not spiritual, because there is jealousy and conflict among you, and this shows

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23, 13:40-43, 25:14-46; John 5:28-29; 2 Corinthians 5:9-10; Revelation 20:12-13

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:11

that you are not spiritual. You are acting like ordinary people.”<sup>1</sup>

Paul was saying, “The first time I came to you, I preached the basic principles of the Gospel because you were lost! You were unsaved! You didn’t know the Good News! Yet, even after all this time, I still have to give you the basic message of Jesus! You’re still not able to comprehend anything more!” Paul said earlier that natural people won’t accept the spiritual things – the deep secret thoughts of God that the Spirit reveals to those who are mature.<sup>2</sup> And so, he told them that he still couldn’t talk to them about those things. Why? Because they were still not spiritual people. They still didn’t have wisdom. They still weren’t being taught by the Spirit. So, Paul still had to go over the basic principles of the Gospel with them.

That’s why, when he wrote this letter to them, he included an entire chapter telling them to start loving one another!<sup>3</sup> His whole letter was trying to get them to start obeying the commands of Jesus! That’s what the whole letter of 1 Corinthians is about – it’s all milk, it’s all basic principles, it’s all about obedience. Because as we’ve seen throughout this book, obeying Jesus is part of the Gospel Paul preached! And you can see it right here in this passage. He told them he knew they weren’t spiritual because, “You are acting like ordinary people.”<sup>4</sup>

Real Christians don’t act like normal, ordinary people!

Real Christians live the radical lifestyle that Jesus taught! Real Christians aren’t filled with jealousy, like the Corinthians were, because real Christians aren’t thinking about themselves! Real Christians don’t argue, like the Corinthians were, because as James said, your fights and arguments come from the selfish desires within you – when you want things and you can’t have them!<sup>5</sup> And Paul was saying, real Christians don’t do that!

Real Christians no longer live for themselves; they live for Christ.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Paul could look at the Corinthians and see that they were jealous, they were arguing, and he knew they were not spiritual. Because you’re only spiritual if you live your life in love – and if you love, you don’t look out for yourself, therefore you don’t get jealous, and you don’t argue, and you don’t do all the other things that Paul addressed throughout 1 Corinthians. The book of 1 Corinthians is telling us what it means to be a Christian; it is teaching us the basics.

If you want to mature into the image of Christ, understand the secrets

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 2:14

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 13

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:3

<sup>5</sup> Ref. James 4:1-2

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

of God, know what your inheritance is, know God's will, comprehend the incomprehensible, and be filled with the fullness of God, the only way to do that – the only way – is to stop looking out for your own interests, and start putting others above yourself.

Start living radically. Stop living like a normal, ordinary person. Start living in a radical love that no normal, ordinary person would live in. Start sharing everything in common with true believers. Start living a life where you don't consider any of your possessions to belong to yourself. Start living a life where you make sure the other person's bills are paid before your own bills are paid. This kind of love is not just about doing nice things; it's not just some sort of ministry where you go and do something for others, and then return home, sit down in front of the TV and continue living a comfortable, cushy American lifestyle.

Your American lifestyle is what has to die.

Maturity does not come through teaching, preaching, reading, praying, singing, or studying. It only comes through true biblical love. That's the only way to mature.

The world is full of false teaching – antichrists, servants of Satan – people trying to lead you astray. Do not be deceived by them. Repent. Change the way you live your life. Put your faith in God – not just your belief. Give him your loyalty, your faithfulness, your fidelity. Be trustworthy and reliable. Die with Jesus and rise with him into a new life where you no longer live for yourself, but you live for him – doing what he commands.

And his commands are to love – love others with the same kind of love that he has for you. Love others with a radical love that looks out for their needs and their interests. Love others with a love that doesn't hold anything back – a love that lets go of everything this world offers, a love that stops caring about all the things that seem important in this life, a love that completely consumes you and takes over your life. Do that because that's what Jesus commanded, and you love him.

You love him, so you'll obey him.

And you know that because you obey him, he and the Father will love you. They will make their home with you through the Spirit. Your whole life will change, and you'll see all the incredible things that right now you only read about in the Bible. You'll see the value of the Kingdom. You'll see that your prayers are heard by God, and he answers you. You'll start to understand what the Kingdom is, what God offers, what God is doing, and what God is thinking.

And you'll see yourself mature into the image of Christ – the image of the one who created you. And as John said, that love that consumes your life

## DEAD CHURCH

will drive out all fear, and you'll have confidence on the day of judgment, because you matured into the image of Christ, and in this world you were like him.<sup>1</sup>

“Wisdom is the most important thing; so get wisdom. If it costs everything you have, get understanding.”<sup>2</sup>

“Wisdom begins with fear for the Lord, and understanding begins with knowing the Holy One.”<sup>3</sup>

“I have more understanding than the elders, because I follow your orders.”<sup>4</sup>

“The beginning of wisdom is fear of the LORD; those who obey his orders have good understanding.”<sup>5</sup>

“The LORD tells his secrets to those who fear him; he tells them about his covenant.”<sup>6</sup>

“Those who follow the LORD understand everything.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 John 4:17-18

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 4:7

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 9:10

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 119:100

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 111:10

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 25:14

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 28:5

# Chapter 22

## Jesus vs. Paul?

### Do We Judge the Church or Not?

Throughout this book, we've been talking about what real Christianity is according to the Bible, and how modern Christianity does not look at all like what the Bible says true Christianity is.

It's important that we know what real Christianity is. Christians need to know what real Christians look like, and what they don't look like. They need to be able to identify true Christianity from false Christianity. They need to be able to recognize if the Church around them is alive or dead.

It's important that we know what Jesus and the apostles said real Christianity is. It's important because we need to know if we're really followers of Jesus or not. We don't want to be people who are deceived. We don't want to be people who think we love Jesus, only to hear him tell us that he never knew us.<sup>1</sup> We don't want to find out when it's too late that we were never God's children. The Bible warns us that it's possible to be deceived.<sup>2</sup>

Peter said, "My brothers and sisters, make every effort to be certain that you really are called and chosen by God."<sup>3</sup>

Peter told us to make every effort to be sure that we really are God's children. Why? Because it's possible to think you're called and chosen by God when you aren't. He was telling us to take this seriously. He was telling us to not wait until judgment day to find out for sure. If you just accept what you've always been told by the Church, even though the Bible tells you outright that the Church is going to be full of false teachers and people will be deceived,<sup>4</sup> are you making every effort to be certain that you really are called and chosen by God? If you just accept what they say despite all the warnings, are you really trying hard? Are you doing what Peter told you to do?

Protestants teach that you can have assurance of salvation as long as you're sure you believe the information is true. Protestants think they're doing what Peter said to do when they test themselves against their own theology – theology they received from men. They think they're examining themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 16:18; 2 Corinthians 11:3-4; Ephesians 5:6-7; Colossians 2:4, 2:8; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 1:10

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 20:29-31; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3:16-17; 2 John 7-8; Jude 1-19



against Scripture when they examine themselves against what people have told them Scripture says.

Protestants teach that you can be sure that you know God if you believe in the Gospel, accept Jesus into your heart, and trust in him for salvation. They say that as long as you believe all of the correct information, you can have assurance of salvation.

Many people think they've made every effort to be certain that they're called and chosen by God because they've asked themselves, "Do I really believe in the gospel? Do I trust in Jesus for my salvation?" When they decide that, yes, they do believe, and yes, they do trust, they find themselves sure that they do truly know God.

But that's not what the Bible says. That's just what men have told us the Bible says. And people think it's what the Bible says because they read the Bible through the lens of what they were taught. They didn't start with the Bible. The Bible told us how we can be sure. It told us how we can have assurance of our own salvation:

John said, "We can be sure that we know God if we obey his commands."<sup>1</sup>

Peter told us to make every effort to be certain that we are called and chosen by God. John told us how: If we obey God's commands, we can be sure that we know God.

If you want assurance of salvation, you must look at more than just what you believe, think, and feel. You must look at your actions. Is your life defined by the things God said it should be defined by? Does your life match Scripture? Or does your life only match the lifestyle of the Christians around you? The Bible tells us the Church will fall away. That means our lives must match Scripture – even when it doesn't match all the Christians around us.

John told us how to be sure that we know God. By telling us this, he also told us how to recognize true Christianity from false Christianity. We should not only know whether or not *we* know God – we should be able to know whether *those around us* know him, too.

Throughout the entire New Testament, Jesus and the apostles warned us that the Church would fall away.<sup>2</sup> They warned us that Christians would be deceived. They warned us that the Church would be full of people who think they know God, but they don't obey his commands.

Just like Moses warned Israel that they would rebel against God and become apostate,<sup>3</sup> the Church was also warned. And, just like Israel thought

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-23, 13:18-30, 13:36-43, 24:4-5, 24:11; Mark 4:13-20, 13:5-6, 13:21-23; Luke 6:26, 21:8; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28:15-68, 29:16-29, 30:1-10, 31:16-22, 31:29

they hadn't rebelled against God or become apostate because they still worshiped him, celebrated the feasts, brought sacrifices to God, kept the Sabbath, met together, raised their arms in prayer, sought God, delighted in God, drew near to God, fasted, bowed their heads to God, read Scripture, prophesied, listened to prophecy, and anticipated the day of the Lord,<sup>1</sup> so too, the Church thinks they haven't rebelled against God because they do all those same things.

Quite frankly, the biblical description of apostasy is the modern description of the Church.

This might upset some people. It might offend some people. But it shouldn't surprise us. Jesus and all the apostles warned us that Christianity would become apostate. It's the single biggest warning found throughout the New Testament – it's not a warning you can just ignore!

Yet most Christians ignore it. They don't pay attention to it. They don't give any thought to it. So, they don't recognize that the apostasy has already happened, and they join the apostasy. They don't think about the fact that the Bible says the Church is going to become apostate!

The implication of the Church becoming apostate is that you can't just assume that the Christianity around you is true Christianity. It's not the biggest warning in the New Testament for no reason; it's not something you can just ignore. You are a fool if you just ignore it.

Christians must understand the full picture of what the apostles prophesied, they must understand how they should view the Church today, and they must know how to respond.

The New Testament didn't just tell us *that* the Church would become apostate. It told us *when* it happened: Paul dealt with false believers all throughout his lifetime. But he warned us that the apostasy would significantly increase after his death.

He said, "I know that after I am gone, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even some from your own group will rise up and twist the truth and will lead away followers after them. So be careful!"<sup>2</sup>

Paul warned us that something big was coming, and it was going to happen after his death. Paul said that after he died, wolves would come in, twist the truth and lead away followers after them. He said to be careful. All throughout his letters in the New Testament, he warned us that a huge

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Isaiah 1:11-15, 58:1-5; Jeremiah 8:8-9, 12:2, 14:14-16, 18:18, 19:14-20:6, 21:1-4, 23:16-23, 23:25-32, 26:7-9, 27:14-15, 28:1-17, 36:6, 36:9, 37:17; Ezekiel 20:1-3, 33:30-33; Hosea 5:6-7, 8:1-3, 8:12-13; Amos 5:14, 5:18-23; Micah 3:11-12; Malachi 1:6-14

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:29-31

apostasy was coming, but here he said it was coming after he was gone – meaning, after his death. He warned that after his death, the apostasy he had written about would come. It would be big. It would be a massive falling away – like nothing they had yet encountered. The number of false believers throughout Paul’s lifetime wouldn’t compare to what was coming.

Peter also wrote similar warnings shortly before his death. 2 Peter 2 is an entire chapter warning us about the apostasy that would soon fill the Church. He warned about false teachers, he warned about masses of people being deceived, he warned about lawlessness, he warned that people would call themselves Christians yet live unrepentant lives, and he warned that they would teach others that it is okay to live that kind of life. Peter wrote this warning shortly before he and Paul were both killed in Rome.

Peter and Paul both died around the same time – in the mid-to-late 60’s of the first century. Again, Paul had said that this apostasy was coming, and he said it would begin after his death.

In the book of Jude, we can see Paul’s warning coming to life.

The book of Jude was written within (at most) just a few years after Paul died. Jude began his letter saying, “Dear friends, I was just about to write you about our common salvation. But I felt the need to write you about something else: I want to urge you to defend the faith that was given to the holy people of God once and for all time. For some people have wormed their way into your group. Long ago the prophets wrote about these people who will be judged guilty. They are against God and have distorted the grace of our God into immorality.”<sup>1</sup>

The entire remainder of his letter was about false believers. The entire book warns us to not be deceived by the false Christians all around us.

So, look at the timeline – Paul said the apostasy was going to happen after his death. Then, within just a few short years after his death, Jude wrote a letter. In his letter, he said he was originally going to write about something else, but he changed what he was going to write about because he felt the need to address a bigger issue. That issue? Apostasy.

Jude wrote his letter because something big had just happened in the Church. His entire letter is about false believers – people in the Church, calling themselves Christians, yet refusing to obey the commands of God. He described them as, “...dirty spots in your fellowship meals. They eat with you and have no fear, caring only for themselves.”<sup>2</sup>

The book of Jude shows us what was happening shortly after Paul’s death. Something big had just happened. The apostasy that Paul and Peter

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<sup>1</sup> Jude 3-4

<sup>2</sup> Jude 12

warned about had suddenly arrived. It was so sudden that Jude changed what he was writing about because it became such an urgent issue. And he reminded his readers that the apostles told them this was coming:

“Dear friends, remember what the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ prophesied. They said to you, ‘In the last times there will be people who laugh about God, pursuing their own evil desires.’ These are the people who divide you, people whose thoughts are only of this world, who do not have the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

Jude was saying, “Guys, don’t forget that you were warned about this! You were warned by all the apostles that this was coming!” That’s what we see in the rest of Scripture – we see warning after warning after warning that apostasy was coming. Jude was telling the people to remember their warnings. He was telling them the apostasy had arrived. He reminded them that the apostles had prophesied that it would happen. He warned them to not be led astray – to not give in – to not become one of those apostate believers. He warned them to not be deceived, and to remember that the apostles had told them this would happen.

He wanted Christians to do what the Israelites had failed to do in the Old Testament: He wanted them to take their warnings seriously. He wanted them to take the warnings to heart. He wanted them to not allow themselves to become deceived as apostasy swept through the Church.

Jude is not our only indication that something major changed shortly after Paul and Peter (and many of the other apostles) died. The letter we know as *1 John* was written by the apostle John to address apostasy. He wrote it roughly ten to twenty years after Paul and Peter died. His entire letter was written to tell Christians how to recognize true Christians from false Christians, and how to avoid falling into apostasy themselves.

He said, “My dear children, these are the last days. You have heard that the antichrist is coming, and now many antichrists are already here. This is how we know that these are the last days. These enemies of Christ were in our fellowship, but they left us. They never really belonged to us; for if they had been a part of us, they would have remained with us. But they left, and this shows that none of them really belonged to us.”<sup>2</sup>

Remember what Paul warned us about: He said after his death wolves would come in and attack the flock. He said people who were in the Church would rise up and lead others away. Here, within twenty years of Paul’s death, John said this had already happened. People who were part of the Church had risen up. They had led people away. John called them “antichrists.” He

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<sup>1</sup> Jude 17-19

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:18-19

proceeded to warn us that these antichrists are trying to deceive us. They're teaching lies. They're leading people astray. He said, "I am writing these things about those people who are deceiving you."<sup>1</sup>

The rest of John's letter teaches us how to recognize true Christians from false Christians.

Paul said the apostasy would happen after his death. Shortly after his death, Jude felt an urgent need to write about false Christians in the Church. Shortly after that, John wrote about how people had fallen away from the truth, were deceiving others, and were leading people astray.

The apostasy happened right when Paul said it would happen – shortly after his death.

The apostles all warned us that it was coming. They warned us that it wouldn't just be a few people here and there... it would be big. Paul told us that the times would be terrible because the Church would be defined by apostasy rather than by true love.<sup>2</sup>

When we look at the Church today, we need to recognize that this is what we're dealing with.

We don't have the same Church we see in Acts. We don't have the same Church we see in Paul's letters. Something changed. People stopped following the truth. They stopped obeying the commands of God. Just like Israel in the Old Testament, the Church today is full of people who come to God, sing songs to God, pray, raise their arms, bow their heads, fast, draw near to God, have holy meetings, and read Scripture. Just like Israel in the Old Testament, Christians today think they know God. They claim God is with them. They prophesy in his name. They say they know God.

But they don't obey his radical commands that would cost them everything important to them. That's what apostasy looks like.

Throughout this book, we've been looking at *how* this apostasy happened. We've talked about how the Church has replaced biblical teaching with human tradition. We've seen how Christians have brought their own definitions and redefined what Scripture teaches by using their own definitions instead of biblical definitions. The Bible warned us that many people who think they are Christians will be deceived. They will follow false teachers. They will be led into destruction. They will expect to hear Jesus say, "well done, good and faithful servant,"<sup>3</sup> but they will end up hearing, "I never knew you. Depart from me."<sup>4</sup>

Since the Bible warned us that the Church would become apostate and

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:26

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:1-9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 25:21,23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23

many Christians would be deceived, it's important that we understand the difference between *true* Christianity and *apostate* Christianity. It's also important that we recognize the biblical implications of apostasy.

As Peter said, it's important that we make every effort to have assurance of our own salvation. But it's not just about our own salvation. The Bible also says that it's important that we recognize the difference between *true* brothers and sisters and *false* brothers and sisters. It's important that we know how to recognize who is truly following Jesus, and who is apostate.

A lot of Christians, even after recognizing that something is wrong with the Church today, still think that anyone who calls themselves a Christian and believes in Jesus is, in fact, a Christian.

But that's not what the Bible teaches.

The Bible teaches us what true Christianity looks like. It tells us that it's a radical lifestyle. It costs everything. It changes everything. It re-prioritizes everything. It also teaches that anything short of this is not Christianity at all – those people are deceived, they're headed toward destruction, they're following the antichrist. They're dead.

Jesus called the church in Sardis *dead*.<sup>1</sup> He told them that if they didn't change, he would come as a thief in the night against them. By saying this, Jesus was telling them that they weren't actually Christians at all. This is because, as we've been discussing throughout this book, true Christianity changes the way you live.<sup>2</sup> True Christianity is about whether or not you obey Jesus. It's about doing the things Jesus directly said to do. It's about living like the early Church in Acts.<sup>3</sup> True Christianity is about action – not merely belief.

Therefore, if someone doesn't have the correct actions, they're not really a Christian – even if they say they are, and even if they think they are. Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets. They come to you disguised like sheep, but they are really dangerous like wolves. You will know these people by their fruit. Grapes don't come from thorn bushes, and figs don't come from thorny weeds. In the same way, every good tree produces good fruit, but a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot produce good fruit. Every tree that does not produce good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. In the same way, you will know them by their fruit. Not all who say to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants."<sup>4</sup>

In this passage, Jesus was saying that you can know whether a person

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 John 2:3, 3:6, 3:9, 4:7-16, 4:19, 5:18

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-35

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:15-21

is a sheep or a wolf based on their fruit – whether or not they do what God wants. He said you can know whether a person is a good tree or a bad tree based on their fruit – whether they obey God or not.

Most Christians today think Jesus was lying.

Obviously, they wouldn't put it in those words... but they prove it's true because they're incapable of identifying true Christians from false Christians. They think it's impossible to identify someone by their fruit! They think the only way to identify a true Christian from a non-Christian is based on whether or not that person calls themselves a Christian. Furthermore, they think that everyone who says they believe in Jesus is truly a Christian. Why? Because they've accepted a gospel that says you're saved by believing the information is true – not by obeying it. They've accepted a Christianity that says it's all about what you think and believe – not about what you do and whether or not you obey.

Christians look at themselves and all the other false Christians around them, they see a lot of bad fruit mixed in with what they *think* is good fruit, and they reject what Jesus said.

Jesus said a good tree cannot have bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot have good fruit. “Obviously, Jesus was wrong. Good trees are bearing some bad fruit. Jesus said they would bear *no* bad fruit. But clearly when he said ‘no bad fruit,’ what he meant was, ‘slightly less than others.’”

By redefining what Christianity is, Christians have made it impossible for themselves to identify a tree by its fruit. When they read this passage, they choose their own theology, and their own idea about what it means to be a Christian, over what Jesus actually said. They reject what Jesus said for the sake of their own doctrines and theologies.<sup>1</sup> In order for the Church to grow into maturity, Christians need to start recognizing the difference between those who *say* they love God and those who *do* love God.

“If you love me, you will obey my commands... Those who have my commands and obey them are the ones who love me... If people love me, they will obey my teaching.”<sup>2</sup> “Loving God means obeying his commands.”<sup>3</sup>

For the Church to grow into maturity, Christians need to stop thinking of apostate Christianity as a real, viable option. This means they also need to stop thinking of apostate Christians as real, true brothers and sisters. The Bible told us what real Christians look like. It told us what the fruit should be, and how to recognize true believers from false believers.

Christians need to start accepting the Bible's definitions.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9

<sup>2</sup> John 14:15,21,23

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 5:3

Jesus told us that we can identify who is truly a Christian and who is not based on the fruit in their lives. Why? Because those who truly love him will obey him. And only those who obey him actually love him. Therefore, if someone is not obeying his commands – his radical, extreme, costly commands – then that person isn't really a Christian, even if they think they are.

Ancient Israel thought they followed God, but they were apostate. The Pharisees thought they diligently served God, but they were hypocrites. The church in Sardis thought they were alive, but they were dead. The New Testament warned us that the Church as a whole will be deceived – thinking they're on the narrow road to life, but really being on the broad road to destruction.<sup>1</sup>

Only those who obey Jesus actually love him. Not everyone who calls themselves a Christian is truly a Christian. Or, as John said when he was addressing the apostasy of the Church, “So if we say we have fellowship with God, but we continue living in darkness, we are liars and do not follow the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

“Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”<sup>3</sup>

“Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.”<sup>4</sup>

“If you love the world, the love of the Father is not in you.”<sup>5</sup>

“Those who do not practice righteousness are not God's children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God's children.”<sup>6</sup>

“Whoever does not love is still dead.”<sup>7</sup>

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.”<sup>8</sup>

“If people say, ‘I love God,’ but hate their brothers or sisters, they are liars. Those who do not love their brothers and sisters whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have never seen.”<sup>9</sup>

Repeatedly, John told us how to recognize true believers: It's not based on what they say, think, believe, or feel. It's based on what they do. Do they obey God's commands or not? Do they love – not with the world's love, but with the radical love of Jesus? John said you either love others radically with

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 1:6

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 2:4

<sup>4</sup> 1 John 2:9

<sup>5</sup> 1 John 2:15

<sup>6</sup> 1 John 3:10

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 3:14

<sup>8</sup> 1 John 4:8

<sup>9</sup> 1 John 4:20



the extreme love of Jesus that completely forgets about yourself and only looks out for the good of others, or you hate. There is no in-between. If a Christian only loves with the same kind of love the world has for others, it's the same as hatred in God's eyes.

John was saying the same thing Jesus said: you can identify a tree by its fruit. If someone isn't obeying the commands of God, it doesn't matter if they *say* they love God. It doesn't matter if they *think* they love God. It doesn't matter if they feel strong affection for God. It doesn't matter if they believe all the information. It doesn't matter if they say they know God. It doesn't matter if they themselves are fully convinced that they're Christians. If they don't obey what God said to do, they're still dead, they're still in darkness, they don't follow the truth, they're not God's children, and they don't know God.

This is how we were told to identify true Christians from false Christians. This is how we recognize someone by their fruit.

True Christians must stop thinking that everyone else who calls themselves a Christian is truly a Christian. They must stop thinking that just because someone thinks they're doing something for the Lord, that it's what God wants.

However, it's also important that we recognize something else...

Every Christian who grew up in Church knows that we're not supposed to judge others. We all know that we need to be careful not to judge. We're all familiar with Jesus' words, "Don't judge others, and you will not be judged."<sup>1</sup>

So, obviously, it's important that we don't judge others. We need to make sure that we go through life without judging other people. This is something that often comes up when we talk about recognizing fruit and knowing who's a Christian and who's not – the response is often, "Be careful not to judge!" And that's true! We must be careful not to judge.

But let me ask you: do you know what that verse means, or do you just assume you know what it means? Do you know what Jesus meant when he said *judge* or do you bring your own definitions and assume he was talking about the same thing you would be talking about if you said what he said?

Based on what you understand about this verse, would you say it's right or wrong to judge the Church?

Many Christians say, "Be careful not to judge the Church. You can't judge the Church." Is that what Jesus was saying? Was Jesus saying we shouldn't identify fruit? Was he saying we shouldn't look at someone's actions to determine if they're following the Lord? Most Christians are quick to look

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:37

at this verse and say, “be careful not to judge the Church. You can’t judge the Church...” but Paul actually said the complete opposite. He said it’s our responsibility to judge the Church:

“It is not my business to judge those who are *not* part of the church. God will judge them. But you *must* judge the people who *are* part of the church.”<sup>1</sup>

You must judge the people who are part of the Church.

That’s what Paul said.

Christians tend to get one verse stuck in their head, and they don’t even understand it. What’s worse, they build their lives around it and teach it to others. As Paul said, “They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand either what they are talking about or what they so confidently assert.”<sup>2</sup>

When Jesus told us not to judge others, he wasn’t saying that we shouldn’t evaluate fruit. He wasn’t saying we shouldn’t look at whether or not someone obeys God in order to know if they’re real Christians. And he wasn’t saying we shouldn’t judge the Church.

It’s our job to judge the Church.

I’ve heard pastors and many Christians talk about how we shouldn’t judge the Church because the Church is the bride of Christ – the Temple of God. They say that judging the Church is like trying to tear down the Temple of God. But here’s the problem: if the Church is apostate, then it’s not the Temple of God! If the Church is full of people who look like this world and don’t obey the commands of God, then, according to Scripture, they’re dead. And if they’re dead, they don’t have the Spirit living in them. If they don’t have the Spirit living in them, then they’re not the bride of Christ, and they’re not the Temple of God.

When Jude warned us about the false believers that were beginning to fill the Church, he said, “[They] do not have the Spirit.”<sup>3</sup>

If they don’t have the Spirit, then how are they God’s Temple?

One Christian teacher has said that if you judge the Church, it would be the same as if you went to the Temple of Solomon, right after seeing God’s glory fill the inner sanctuary,<sup>4</sup> and you started hitting it with a sledge hammer to tear it down. But that’s not what we’re talking about, because we’re not talking about judging the Church during the time of the apostles when the Church was walking in the commands of God and filled with the Holy Spirit.

We’re talking about the Church during a time of apostasy. Or in other

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, emphasis added

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 1:7

<sup>3</sup> Jude 19

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Chronicles 5:13-14, 7:1-3

words, going back to the analogy of the Temple of Solomon, we're not talking about the day God's glory filled the inner sanctuary. We're talking about the Temple during the time of the prophet Jeremiah.

During the time of the prophet Jeremiah, who were the people saying, "You cannot speak against the Temple of God"? Who were the people saying, "You're attacking God's Temple with your words!"?

It was the false prophets.<sup>1</sup> It was the apostate people. It was the ungodly priests.

Jeremiah, the prophet of God, was the one who was proverbially "taking a sledgehammer to the Temple of God." He told the people that God was going to destroy the Temple and burn the entire city to the ground. The ones telling him to stop were the ones headed to destruction. They thought Jeremiah was blaspheming God's Holy Temple by saying that the Temple would be torn down. They tried to kill him for saying it.

This is what Christians do today when they try to stop people who fear God from judging the Church. They think they're defending God's Temple, but they're actually opposing God.

What ended up happening to Solomon's Temple?

It was torn down. It was burned to the ground. All the treasures and holy things in the Temple were carried off to Babylon and placed in the temples of false gods. Jerusalem was demolished. The entire land was left destroyed. The Old Testament referred to it as "the day of the Lord."<sup>2</sup> Amos had warned them that they shouldn't be looking forward to the day of the Lord, because it would be a day of darkness for them – not light. The people of Israel were convinced they served God. They were convinced they were alive. They were convinced they were defending God's Temple. But God came against them suddenly – like a thief in the night.

God doesn't live in the midst of an apostate people. He tells them, "I am not your God. And you are not my people."<sup>3</sup>

When Christians say, "Don't judge the Church," and they treat the Church as if it's still in the same condition that it was in when the apostles were leading it, they're not defending God's Temple. They're doing what apostate people do when God tells them that he doesn't live with them. If the Church today is rejecting the commands of God, living a life God hates, loving the world, thinking about themselves, loving money, and only giving God lip-service, then they're dead. They're apostate. They're not the bride of Christ. They're not the Temple of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 26:6-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Joel 2:1-14; Amos 5:18-20

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Hosea 1:9

Paul called them apostate.<sup>1</sup> James called them adulterers.<sup>2</sup> Peter called them dirty spots and blemishes.<sup>3</sup> John called them the antichrist.<sup>4</sup> Jude called them twice dead.<sup>5</sup> Jesus called them wolves.<sup>6</sup> They were describing “Christians” when they said these things. Were they “taking a sledgehammer to the Temple of God” when they said these things?

The apostate Church is not the Church.

Paul said it’s our job to judge the Church. It’s not “attacking the Temple of God.” It’s not “speaking against the bride of Christ.” It’s our responsibility as people who love the Temple of God and love the bride of Christ.

Why? Why is it our job to judge the Church? Why is it our responsibility? When Paul said we must judge the Church, he explained why: “You know the saying, ‘Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ Take out all the old leaven so that you will be a new batch of dough without leaven, which you really are.”<sup>7</sup>

He then wrote about *how* we’re supposed to judge the Church (we’ll come back to this in the next chapter), and he concluded, “The Scripture says, ‘You must remove the evil person among you.’”<sup>8</sup>

Why must we judge the Church?

We talked about leaven in an earlier chapter. Leaven is essentially yeast. You put it in bread dough, and it spreads through the whole thing, changing the entire batch of dough, causing it to rise. Paul was saying if you don’t judge the Church, apostasy will spread – it will spread through the whole thing just like leaven spreads through an entire batch of dough. You must get the leaven out. You must keep the dough from becoming leavened. You must not let it spread.

The reason we are supposed to judge the Church is so that the Church doesn’t become apostate. It’s to keep the Church pure. If we follow what Jesus taught, and recognize who are true Christians, and who are not, then we won’t begin to follow false brothers into apostasy.

Think of it this way:

Imagine you’re on a narrow, difficult, painful road,<sup>9</sup> and you look to your side, and you see someone traveling in the same direction as you, but on

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Thessalonians 2:3

<sup>2</sup> Ref. James 4:4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 2:13

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Jude 12

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 7:15-20

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6-7

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:13

<sup>9</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:13-14

a different road. Their road is easy. It's wide. It seems like it would be a much easier trip. They say they're going to the same place you're going. They say their destination is the same as yours. If you believe them, and you believe that their road will also take you to the same place, wouldn't you want to jump over to their road? Wouldn't you want to choose their path instead of the one you're on?

This is what has happened in the Church.

Christians don't want to judge the Church. They don't want to judge a tree by its fruit. They don't accept the gospel from Scripture – they accept a gospel that says you're saved by what you think and believe to be true. Then they see people who call themselves Christians – they get a good career, live a comfortable life, have a happy family, and enjoy all the things this life offers. They assume that those people are going to arrive at the same destination as them. Why? Because those people call themselves Christians and believe in Jesus. If you accept the wrong gospel, then you'll think those people are saved, too! And if they're going to arrive at the same destination, but they're going to have a much easier road to get there, then why wouldn't Christians jump over to their road?

The problem is that so many Christians don't realize that they've already jumped over. They're just accepting the standard they see around them, and they don't realize just how radical Jesus is. Paul corrected the Corinthians because they were still acting like normal, ordinary people.<sup>1</sup> Unless you are living in a way that would cause people to think you're an alien to this world, you haven't arrived yet.

Christians don't accept what Jesus had to say about judging a tree by its fruit. They don't accept what John said about how to know for sure if someone else knows God. And the result is what we see all around us – everyone is choosing the easy road. Everyone believes the easy road results in the same destination, so everyone is choosing it.

The Bible is clear: Many will be deceived.

The warnings in Scripture are not that these people will have “less treasure” when they get to heaven. The warnings are that these people are headed to destruction. They're apostate. Paul said they tolerate people who preach a different Jesus, they receive a different spirit, and they accept a different gospel.<sup>2</sup> In other words, they may say they believe in the gospel, they may say they believe in Jesus, and they may think they have the Spirit, but despite all this, they're not actually Christians.

If the gospel you believe is a different gospel than the one preached in

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 3:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:4

the Bible, you're not saved. If you're trusting in Jesus – but it's a different Jesus than the true Jesus of Scripture, you're not saved. If you received a spirit, but it's a different spirit than the Spirit of God... whose temple are you?

If Christians never learn how to judge a tree by its fruit, they will never learn how to stop following these people into apostasy. If Christians keep thinking all roads lead to heaven as long as you believe in Jesus, then they'll typically choose the road that's most appealing to them.

Brothers and sisters, if you love God, you will obey God! And you need to start recognizing that if others actually love God, they will obey him, too. This means that all those people who think they're going to the same place as you... they are not. Not unless they are also obeying the radical commands of Jesus that cost us everything.<sup>1</sup>

This is important to recognize because we need to stop allowing ourselves to accept their lifestyles. We need to choose the Kingdom even when they wouldn't. We need to shine as a light to them – because they're lost, wandering in the darkness like sheep without a shepherd. We need to show them what it means to be alive and not let them influence us. We need to be an unleavened batch of dough, and not let their leaven get in and start to spread.

So, we are supposed to recognize true Christians from false Christians based on their fruit – that fruit being whether or not they do what God wants. As John said, "Anyone who says, 'I know God,' but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person."<sup>2</sup>

As we've seen throughout this book, the Church today looks almost identical to Israel during their apostasy. The Church today looks almost identical to the Pharisees during the time of Jesus.

When God judged ancient Israel, Babylon tore the city to the ground. Hundreds of thousands of Israelites died. The Temple was destroyed. The people were led away from the Promised Land into exile. When God judged Israel again shortly after Jesus, Rome burned the city to the ground. Millions of Israelites died. The Temple was destroyed again. The survivors were sold into slavery and led into exile. The Promised Land was left desolate for thousands of years.

If the description of the Church today perfectly matches the description of Israel right before God judged them with Babylon, or the description of the Pharisees right before God judged them with Rome, pause for a second... Think really hard about the implications of that.

What does that imply about the Church today?

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 14:33

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:4

The Israelites were called God's people, too.<sup>1</sup> They were called God's children.<sup>2</sup> Israel was the Kingdom of God. God had rescued them from slavery and brought them to the promised land. God led them through the wilderness. They held on to this history all the way through their apostasy, continuing to think that they were still God's children. The day before Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the Israelites still thought God would never let his kingdom fall. They believed they were still his people. They didn't recognize that things had changed.

The Church today thinks the same way. They look at what happened in the early Church. They look at what Jesus did. They look at the apostles. And they assume that the descriptions of the Church in the Bible are the same descriptions of the Church today. They call themselves God's children. They call themselves God's people. But they're not recognizing that God also called Israel his children. He also called them his people. But when they stopped obeying him, he told them, "You are not my people."<sup>3</sup> When they stopped obeying him, he told them that they were not his children.<sup>4</sup>

In Romans, Paul wrote about how Israel stopped obeying God, and God cut them off. They were no longer his people; he was not their God. He rejected them.

Paul said, "It is as if some of the branches from an olive tree have been broken off. You Gentiles are like the branch of a wild olive tree that has been grafted to that first tree. You now share the rich root of the first tree. So do not consider yourselves superior to those branches that were broken off. If you brag, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say, 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.' That is true. But those branches were broken off because they were unfaithful, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, then he will not spare you either. Notice that God is kind and also severe. He is severe toward those who stop following him. But God is kind to you, if you continue following in his kindness. If you do not, you will also be cut off from the tree. And if the Jews do not continue in unbelief, they will be grafted in. For God is able to graft them in again. If you Gentiles were cut off from a wild olive tree and, contrary to nature, grafted into a good olive tree, how much more will these natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree again."<sup>5</sup>

In this section, Paul was talking about how Israel fell away from God.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Jeremiah 3:1, 3:8; 31:31-32; Hosea 2:2-20; Isaiah 54:4-8

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 14:1, 32:5-6; Jeremiah 3:14, 3:19, 3:22, 31:20

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Hosea 1:9

<sup>4</sup> Ref. John 8:39-47

<sup>5</sup> Romans 11:17-24

They were unfaithful to him. They didn't have *pístis* – they didn't have fidelity. And because of that, they were like branches cut off from a tree. The tree still stands – Israel (the Kingdom of God) still stands – but those who rejected God were cut off.

Paul gave a warning to us in the Church Age: If we don't continue in God's love, we will be cut off, too. If we are unfaithful, we will be cut off, too. That means that just like God told Israel, "You are not my people and I am not your God,"<sup>1</sup> if the Church does not continue in his love then he will also tell them, "You are not my people and I am not your God."

His standards haven't changed. He didn't lower the bar for us. Just like Israel thought they were God's people because they looked at all the amazing things God did for them, but they were wrong... the Church today looks at all the things God did in the early Church and they think they are still God's people because they look at what God did back then. But if they are unfaithful, then they are branches that have been cut off. And just like the Jews, they don't realize they've been cut off.

But anyone who repents and begins to walk in fidelity and faithfulness can be grafted back in, whether from the wild olive tree or from the good tree. This was a warning for us in the Church Age. If you are unfaithful, you will be cut off – it doesn't matter if you think you're a Christian or look at the history of the Church and think, "Wow, the Church is God's people!" If the Church is unfaithful, they are branches that get cut off.

Anyone who is unfaithful gets cut off.

When we Jesus interacted with the people of Israel, we should recognize that his interactions with the Church today would be very similar, because the Church today looks just like they did. The people of Israel said to Jesus, "God is our Father; he is the only Father we have."<sup>2</sup>

Isn't that exactly what Christians today think and say? Christians assume that God is their Father because they assume they are his people. They look at what God did with the Church two thousand years ago, and they assume nothing has changed. The Israelites did the same thing. But Jesus replied to them, "You belong to your father the devil, and you want to do what he wants... The person who belongs to God obeys the words of God. But you don't obey, because you don't belong to God."<sup>3</sup>

They thought they were God's children, but Jesus said they were actually children of the devil. Why?

Because they didn't obey God's commands. They inherited the devil's

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Hosea 1:9

<sup>2</sup> John 8:41

<sup>3</sup> John 8:44,47



nature – not God’s nature. They proved through their actions that they were children of the devil.

John said the same thing about Christians: “In this way it is apparent who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not practice righteousness are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>1</sup>

According to both Jesus and John, God’s children are called “children of the devil” if they stop obeying God’s commands. It was true of Israel, and it is true of the Church.

John the Baptist told the people of Israel, “Do the things that prove your repentance. Don’t begin to say to yourselves, ‘Abraham is our father.’ For I tell you that God could raise up children for Abraham from these rocks. The ax is now ready to cut down the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you understand the implications for the Church today?

Israel had an amazing beginning. God rescued them. He held their hand and delivered them out of slavery. He called them his children.<sup>3</sup> He called them his bride.<sup>4</sup> Does that sound familiar?

Just because the Church had an amazing beginning doesn’t mean that God is your Father if you call yourself a Christian. Don’t begin to say to yourselves, “God is our Father.” For I tell you that God could raise up children for himself out of rocks. Do the things that prove your repentance. Because the ax is now ready to cut down the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The Church today does not look like the early Church. Christians today do not live the way they lived. They don’t obey the commands of God that the early Church obeyed. The Church today looks like apostate Israel; it looks like the Pharisees.

What are the implications of that for the Church?

What are the implications for your own life?

Christians need to stop thinking of the Church as ‘everyone who believes in the information about Jesus and calls themselves Christians.’ Christians need to stop thinking that God views the Church today the same way he did the early Church even though the Church today looks nothing like the early Church.

God’s children are those who obey him. Anyone who does not obey him is not his child. Anyone who does not obey him is a child of the devil.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 3:10

<sup>2</sup> Luke 3:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 14:1, 32:5-6; Jeremiah 3:14, 3:19, 3:22, 31:20

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Isaiah 54:5; Jeremiah 2:2, 3:6-10, 3:30, 31:31-33; Ezekiel 16:8-14, 16:32-34; Hosea 2:7

We can know who true Christians are by looking at how they live. Do they do the things God wants, or do they reject his radical, extreme, costly commands? As we talked about earlier in this book, it's not just "do they do things for God?" The Pharisees did things for God! Apostate Israel did things for God! Lots of people think they're doing things for God. But are they doing what God said to do? Are they obeying his commands? Are they living the life we see in the book of Acts?

Unless their lives look like what we read in Acts,<sup>1</sup> they're not doing what God said to do. Unless they're sharing everything in common, they're not doing what God said to do. Unless they're looking out for the needs of others above their own,<sup>2</sup> they're not doing what God said to do. Unless they're selling their possessions and giving to the brothers and sisters around them,<sup>3</sup> they're not doing what God said to do. Unless they are living in equality where everyone is equal and no one has more than they need and no one has less,<sup>4</sup> they are not doing what God said to do.

We have God's commands in Scripture. We can know what God wants. If we know what God wants, we can see if people are living the way God wants. And if we can see if they're obeying him, then we can know who is a real Christian and who is not.

So, then the only question is... what do we do about it?

That's what we're going to look at in the next chapter.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:19-34, 20:25-28; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Philippians 2:1-8

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:22, 19:16-24; Luke 6:24-25, 6:38, 8:14, 12:15-21, 12:33-34, 19:1-10; Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 1 Timothy 6:17-19; James 4:3-5; 1 John 3:16-18

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

# Chapter 23

## Why Did Paul Say to Avoid People?

What I'm going to talk about in this chapter is likely going to challenge your current beliefs. It's something that I don't hear talked about in the Church at all; most Christians think the opposite of what I'm about to say. So, I'd like to ask you to pause for a moment. Ask the Lord to help you accept anything that is true – anything he might be trying to teach you. As always, please go to Scripture! See if it says the same thing I'm saying in this chapter. I don't want you to just follow me! In this chapter, I'm going to address something I see in Scripture, but I've heard very few Christians talk about or apply to their own lives.

And that needs to change.

What we will cover in this chapter is key for the Church to be able to grow. But it's something that most Christians right now don't accept.

*Father, I ask that you would use this chapter to teach people. Use this chapter to show people ways that they bring human traditions to their lives instead of following what the Bible says. I ask that you would open eyes to see what Scripture teaches, and what it says we should be doing about these things. Use this chapter, and this book, to change lives and bring people into the life that you intended us to live.*

Things often get sticky when we talk about what our response should be when we see apostasy in the Church.

I've known a number of people who have spent years – decades even – attending the same church, trying to reach the same people, trying to show people that they weren't following God, but no one listened.

I read a book once where a pastor taught Christians that the Church needs to change. He recognized ways that the Church today doesn't look like the early Church. He challenged Christians to change their lives, to reprioritize. There were several things in that book that were great! But there was also something in that book that caught my eye. Toward the beginning of the book, he said that he hoped his book would encourage Christians who have seen the problems in the Church today. He knew many Christians have seen the problems in the Church, they want something different, and they've left their churches, looking for something more like what they read about in the book of Acts. This pastor wrote that he hoped his book would encourage them to return to the churches they left. He referenced Hebrews, which says, "You

should not neglect meeting together...”<sup>1</sup>

This is the view most Christians hold. “Sure, there are a lot of problems – the Church today has a lot of issues. But we shouldn’t neglect to meet together. That’s a biblical command.”

However, this mindset comes back to the same issue we discussed in the last chapter. If you are regularly meeting together, every single week, with a bunch of people who don’t obey the commands of God... are you doing what Hebrews said to do?

Are you meeting with fellow believers?

Or did you fail to judge the tree by the fruit?<sup>2</sup> Did you fail to recognize the difference between true Christianity and false Christianity?

John called false believers “the antichrist.”<sup>3</sup> Does God want us to not neglect to meet together with the antichrist?! Does God want us regularly meeting together with people who are apostate? If a Christian left a church because no one in the church wanted to obey the radical commands of God, and that Christian wanted to find something more... should we be encouraging that Christian to return to those people because one single verse in the Bible says we shouldn’t neglect to meet together?

Doesn’t “meeting together” imply that the other people are real Christians too?

This pastor made the same mistake many Christians make. He saw that real Christianity means we must live our lives obeying the commands of God. But he didn’t let go of the Protestant theology that told him everyone who says they believe in Jesus is a Christian. He didn’t judge the tree by its fruit. The only way that verse in Hebrews could apply to the situation he was talking about is if all those people who don’t obey God are also Christians, too.

But the Bible clearly says they’re not.<sup>4</sup>

Meeting together with false believers is not what Hebrews was telling us to do. But most Christians don’t realize this because they don’t know how to recognize false believers in the first place! Not only is this completely misapplying “not neglecting to meet together,” but it’s also a direct

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:25

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-20

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-27, 10:34-39, 12:33-37, 12:48-50, 13:18-23, 16:24-25, 19:21-24, 25:31-36; Mark 3:33-35, 8:34-37, 10:21-25; Luke 6:20-36, 6:43-49, 8:11-15, 8:21, 9:23-26, 9:61-62, 11:27-28, 12:15-21, 12:22-34, 12:42-44, 13:24, 14:25-35, 16:11-15, 17:33, 18:22-25; John 5:28-29, 12:24-26, 12:47-50, 14:15, 14:21, 14:23; Acts 10:35, 26:19-20; Romans 6:1-14, 12:1-2; 1 Corinthians 7:19; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11, 5:14-15, 8:8-9, 9:6-13, 11:4; Galatians 1:10, 6:7-10; Ephesians 4:22-24; Philippians 2:17; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Timothy 6:3-5, 6:17-19; 2 Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-5; Titus 2:11-14, 3:14; Hebrews 4:11-13, 11:1-12:1; James 1:22-25, 1:26-27, 2:13, 2:14-26, 4:3-5; 1 Peter 1:22-23, 2:24, 3:10-12; 2 Peter 2:1-22; 1 John 1:5-7, 2:3-6, 2:9-11, 2:15, 2:24-25, 3:4-11, 3:14, 3:16-24, 4:8, 4:12, 4:16-21, 5:1-3, 5:18-20; 2 John 9; 3 John 11; Jude 3-19; Revelation 3:1-3, 3:15-22, 19:6-8, 20:11-14

contradiction of what the Bible tells us our response should actually be.

By telling Christians to keep meeting together with false believers, as if some religious meeting is what God really cares about, this pastor actually encouraged Christians to disregard everything the Bible says about how we should handle apostasy in the Church. He did the same thing Christians today do with almost everything else – he took one Bible verse out of context and applied it across the board with no regard to anything else the Bible says on the topic.

It's a common mistake. But it's not how we should handle Scripture.

The Bible warned us about apostasy. It told us the Church would fall away.<sup>1</sup> It also told us what to do when we see it. We need to know what it said to do, and we need to do it.

The Bible must be our standard for how we're going to respond – not our own thoughts, our own feelings, or some pastor's advice. So, what does the Bible say about meeting together with people who think they're Christians, but who refuse to obey the commands of God? What does the Bible say our response should be when we see that the Church has become apostate?

As I mentioned in the last chapter, in 1 Corinthians, Paul addressed some issues in the Church. He told them to remove the leaven or it would spread. If they allowed the leaven (which he called “the leaven of sin and wickedness”) to stay among them, it would spread among them and it would change the whole batch of dough – the whole Body of Christ.

This is what Paul said to the Corinthians:

“You know the saying, ‘Just a little leaven makes the whole batch of dough rise.’ Take out all the old leaven so that you will be a new batch of dough without leaven, which you really are... I wrote to you in my earlier letter not to associate with those who sin sexually. But I did not at all mean you should not associate with those of this world who sin sexually, or with the greedy, or swindlers, or those who worship idols. To get away from them you would have to leave this world. I am writing to tell you that you must not associate with those who call themselves believers in Christ but who sin sexually, or are greedy, or worship idols, or slander, or get drunk, or cheat people. Do not even eat with people like that. It is not my business to judge those who are not part of the church. God will judge them. But you must judge the people who are part of the church. The Scripture says, ‘You must remove the evil person among you.’”<sup>2</sup>

In this section, we see that Paul had been telling the early Church not

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 20:29-31; 1 Timothy 4:1-3; 2 Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-4; 2 Peter 2:1-22, 3:16-17; 2 John 7-8; Jude 1-19

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 5:6-7, 9-13

to associate with people who live in sin. But here, he clarified: When he told people this, he didn't mean they should disassociate with people in the world. He was not talking about unbelievers who knew they were unbelievers. He meant that they should disassociate with people who called themselves Christians, yet who continued living in sin.

In other words, he was saying, "do not continue to associate with false believers." He was saying you can know who they are based on how they live, and if they're living that way without repenting, you need to stop associating with them.

The word he used, translated *associate*, is a Greek word that means *mix up together*. He was saying, "You can't be mixed up together in the same batch of dough." Why? Because if you have *any* leaven *at all* in your dough, and you don't remove it, the entire batch of dough will rise. The entire batch of dough will become leavened.

He was telling the Corinthians that they couldn't just continue associating with and surrounding themselves with people who called themselves believers but refused to submit to and follow the commands of Jesus. He went so far as to say, "Do not even eat with people like that."

Don't associate with them. Don't even eat with them. These are the instructions Scripture gives when we see people who call themselves Christians, but they don't obey God's commands.

That's a far cry from telling true Christians to return to their churches and continue meeting together with those people!

When Paul told the Corinthians that they must judge the Church, he said way more than just, "Recognize the fruit." He told them to recognize the fruit, and then stop associating with those who call themselves Christians but continue to bear bad fruit. He wasn't just telling them to know the difference. He was calling them to action.

Paul quoted the Law of Moses, which said, "You must remove the evil person among you." In the Law of Moses, this was a phrase used whenever God told the Israelites to put someone to death.<sup>1</sup> Paul wasn't telling us to put someone to death. But he was saying God is still that serious about not allowing evil in our midst.

The Kingdom of God is no longer a physical earthly kingdom – it's a spiritual kingdom.<sup>2</sup> So, now it's not about putting someone to death. But beyond that, nothing has changed – we are still supposed to remove the evil person from among us. We're not supposed to keep associating. We're not supposed to even eat with someone like that.

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 17:7, 19:19, 21:21, 22:21, 22:24, 24:7

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:17, 10:7; Mark 9:1; Luke 17:20-21; John 18:33-37

This is something Paul taught on numerous occasions...

“But even if we ourselves or an angel from heaven were to preach to you a different message than the Good News we preached, let him be anathema! I said this before, and now I say it again: If anyone is preaching a different message than the one you received, let him be anathema!”<sup>1</sup>

Here, Paul used the word *anathema*. Most Christians read this thinking Paul was saying, “Let him be cursed!” They picture it as if Paul was calling down some curse on the person who was teaching a different gospel. But that’s actually not quite right.

The word *anathema* is an Old Testament word. We often don’t realize it, because it’s a Greek word and the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. But during the time Paul was writing, his audience would have been using the Greek translation of the Old Testament (it’s called the *Septuagint*). They would have known what Paul was saying, because the word *anathema* was used countless times throughout the Septuagint. And it never meant calling a curse down on someone.

For example, Moses told the Israelites that if anyone ever came along, telling them to worship false gods, and if an entire city followed them and worshiped false gods, then the Israelites were to wipe out that entire city, burn all of the spoils with fire, and leave the city uninhabited forever. He described it as, “With an anathema, you shall anathematize it, and everything in it.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, Moses told the Israelites that when they entered the promised land, they were supposed to completely destroy all the Canaanites who lived there. The Canaanites were extremely evil, and God was not allowing Israel to make any peace with them. He told them not to allow the Canaanites to continue living in their midst. They were supposed to completely wipe them out. In the Septuagint, it said, “With anathema, you shall anathematize them... lest they teach you to do all their abominations that they did for their gods and you sin before the Lord your God.”<sup>3</sup>

In the Old Testament, *anathema* wasn’t a curse you called down on someone. It was something you did. It was an action. *Anathema* was about removing the evil person from among you so that that person wouldn’t spread their wickedness to you. Or in other words, it was about removing the leaven from the batch of dough so that the whole batch of dough didn’t rise. In short, when Paul told the Galatians that if someone came, preaching a different gospel, that person should be *anathema*, Paul wasn’t calling down a curse; he was telling the Galatians that they had to do something. *Anathema* was an

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 1:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 13:15 (NETS)

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 20:17-18 (NETS)

action. The Galatians had a responsibility to act.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he quoted a Bible verse about putting someone to death. Similarly, here, when he wrote to the Galatians, he referenced a biblical concept about wiping people out. He was not saying to kill anyone! But he was saying, “You can’t let this continue. You have a responsibility to get this out of your midst.”

Paul was telling them to take action.

Paul was telling both the Corinthians and the Galatians that they could not associate with people who call themselves believers, yet who either refuse to follow Jesus or who teach a different gospel. When Christians today see people calling themselves believers, yet living a life in complete contradiction to everything Jesus and the apostles taught, we are instructed by Scripture to not associate with them.

When Christians today see people believing and teaching a gospel that doesn’t line up with Scripture – a gospel that says you’re saved by believing in Jesus – regardless of whether or not you obey him – Christians are commanded by Scripture to have nothing to do with them, to anathematize them, to not associate with them, and to not even eat with them.

That means we can’t keep going to church with them. It means we don’t keep doing Bible studies with them. We don’t keep praying with them. We don’t keep treating them as if they’re true brothers and sisters.

Because they’re not.

You can judge a tree by its fruit.

“Anyone who says, ‘I know God,’ but does not obey his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person.”<sup>1</sup>

“Anyone who claims, ‘I am in the light,’ but hates a brother or sister, is still in the darkness... Whoever hates a brother or sister is in darkness, lives in darkness, and does not know where to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”<sup>2</sup>

“Anyone who continues to sin belongs to the devil, because the devil has been sinning since the beginning. The Son of God came for this purpose: to destroy the devil’s work... In this way it is apparent who God’s children are and who the devil’s children are: Those who do not do what is right are not God’s children, and those who do not love their brothers and sisters are not God’s children.”<sup>3</sup>

If they are not God’s children, then you shouldn’t treat them like God’s children. John called them “the antichrist” and “the devil’s children.”<sup>4</sup> If you

<sup>1</sup> 1 John 2:4

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 2:9,11

<sup>3</sup> 1 John 3:8,10

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29, 3:8,10



want to live for the Lord, and you want to please the Lord, then you must separate yourself from the apostasy. It doesn't mean you can't try to reach them and get them to repent! But it means you treat them the same way you would an unbeliever. You keep yourself separate. This was a concept Paul taught very consistently:

“Brothers and sisters, I urge you to look out for those who cause divisions and who create stumbling blocks. They are against the true teaching you learned, so stay away from them. Such people are not serving our Lord Christ but are only doing what pleases themselves. They use smooth talk and fine words to deceive the hearts of the innocent.”<sup>1</sup>

Here, Paul said to stay away from those people who lead people away from the true teaching. John said “the teaching” is “we must love each other.”<sup>2</sup> And the New Testament explained what *love* means.<sup>3</sup> Paul was again saying to stay away from those who teach anything different. The gospel preached in the Church today is a different teaching. It teaches that you're saved by believing information, but the Bible teaches that you're saved by becoming loyal to Jesus and obeying him. The gospel being preached in the Church today is, as Paul put it, “A different gospel, with a different Jesus, and a different spirit.”<sup>4</sup>

Paul's instructions were to stay away from this.

Paul was also saying to stay away from those who call themselves Christians, but who only do what pleases themselves. In other words, stay away from those who call themselves Christians, but whose actions prove that they're only looking out for themselves. They don't live in the radical love of Jesus; they don't follow the true teaching. Christ died for all so that those who live will no longer live for themselves but for him.<sup>5</sup> Paul was saying to stay away from anyone who doesn't live like that.

Here's another example:

“Do not let anyone deceive you by telling you things that are not true, because these things will bring God's wrath on those who do not obey him. So do not associate with them.”<sup>6</sup>

Do not associate with anyone who claims to be a believer but teaches something opposite of what the Bible teaches – specifically because God's wrath will come on those who don't obey. If that's the case, then how can Christians continue going to a church where they're being told that they're saved by believing the correct information and that they don't have to obey

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 16:17-18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:11, 3:23; 2 John 4-6, 9

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 3:16-18, 4:9-10; John 13:34, 15:12; 2 Corinthians 8:8-15; Philippians 2:1-8

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:4

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 5:15

<sup>6</sup> Ephesians 5:6-7

what Jesus said to do? That's not what the Bible teaches. What they're teaching and living will bring God's wrath on them because they don't obey. Paul said, "Do not associate with them."

"Anyone who has a different teaching and does not agree with the true teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that promotes godliness – that person is full of pride and understands nothing, but is sick with a love for arguing and fighting about words. This brings jealousy, strife, slander, evil suspicions, and constant bickering from those who have corrupted minds and have lost the truth. They think that serving God is a way to make a profit."<sup>1</sup>

Here, Paul wrote about people who have a different teaching that is not in line with the true teaching... what is the true teaching? Love. The true teaching promotes godliness. The true teaching is about living the right way. But Paul said these people are proud, they don't have understanding, they love debating and arguing over words, they bring jealousy, arguments, and constant fights. They have corrupted minds and don't have the truth. Why? Because they don't have love. They think that serving God is a way to make a profit.

Remember when you read passages like this one that this is written from God's perspective – not man's perspective.

You might not look at these people and automatically think they're full of pride and sick with a love for arguing and fighting. But based on God's definition of love – that God wants us to absolutely and completely no longer look out for ourselves, but live our lives looking out for one another, and put each other first – would God say that someone is proud? Would God say that someone loves debating and arguing? Would God say that someone thinks their ministry is a way to make a profit?

In a culture of salaried church staff, pastors, preachers, and Christian authors, that's a serious warning.

Paul added at the end of this description, "Withdraw from such people."<sup>2</sup> This last sentence is often not even included in many translations of the Bible. They just leave it out! But it's right there in the Greek, and it's in keeping with everything else Paul said about how to handle people like this. They are not true Christians. Therefore, you shouldn't join yourself to them. You shouldn't be one of them. You shouldn't keep meeting together with them. You shouldn't keep viewing them as true brothers and sisters.

If Christians have withdrawn from such people, telling them to go back to them is telling them to disobey the Bible. You can't just take one verse that says, "Do not neglect to meet together," and use it across the board. That misses the whole point of what the author was saying. That demonstrates a

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 6:3-5

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Timothy 6:5

deep lack of wisdom and understanding. This is exactly what Paul meant when he said, “They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not understand either what they are talking about or what they so confidently assert.”<sup>1</sup>

If a pastor tells you to return to a church full of people who the Bible tells you to not associate with and withdraw from, then that pastor wants to be a teacher of the law, but he doesn’t even understand what he’s talking about. He’s following human tradition.<sup>2</sup> He’s getting his definitions from the Christian culture around him rather than from God and the Bible. There’s no wisdom in that.

Here are still more examples:

“Stay away from foolish, useless talk and from the arguments of what is falsely called ‘knowledge.’ By saying they have that ‘knowledge,’ some have strayed their way from the true faith.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul said something similar in his second letter to Timothy:

“Stay away from foolish, useless talk, because that will lead people further away from God. Their evil teaching will spread like gangrene...”<sup>4</sup>

Paul told us to stay away from foolish talk and false teaching. The implication of that is clear: we shouldn’t keep going to their meetings and participating in their religion. If they’re calling themselves Christians, but are abandoning the teaching of the New Testament, they’re not our brothers and sisters, and we shouldn’t keep meeting with them and associating with them.

If they’re teaching that you’re saved by belief and that it’s all dependent on whether or not you accept the right information, then they’re teaching a false gospel. It’s foolish. It’s useless. It’s evil teaching. It’s not the message that promotes godliness; it’s the message that promotes lawlessness. It promotes Christians thinking they can be saved and go to heaven without obeying the Law of Christ – without living in love, without doing what God wants, without doing what is right.<sup>5</sup>

Paul said to stay away from this. It spreads. It’s like gangrene.

If you keep sitting under their teaching, you’ll never be able to see the truth – because every time you read the Bible, you’ll read it through the lens of what a pastor or preacher told you it means. You’ll read it through the lens of the gospel you were given by false teachers – by the antichrist. And this will keep you from being able to understand.

Their gangrene will spread to you.

False teaching is like gangrene; it’s an infection inside the body. The

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Timothy 1:7

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6:20-21

<sup>4</sup> 2 Timothy 2:16-17

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Romans 8:2; 1 Corinthians 9:21; Galatians 6:2

true Church is the Body of Christ. If a body has a disease, you don't nourish the disease. You don't tell people to go back to the disease. You don't keep the disease in close proximity. You don't try to help the disease. You get it out; you kill it.

In the same way, the body of Christ must remove the evil. We cannot allow the gangrene to spread. We should stay away from their foolish talk. We should stay away from their false knowledge. We should have nothing to do with it.

John also taught the same thing as Paul:

“Anyone who goes beyond Christ's teaching and does not abide in it does not have God. But whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If someone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not greet that person or receive them into your house. If you welcome such a person, you participate in the evil work.”<sup>1</sup>

John was clear: if someone isn't abiding in Christ's teaching (which John clearly explained is radical love),<sup>2</sup> then that person doesn't have God. And if someone claiming to be a brother or sister comes to you, but doesn't bring this teaching, you shouldn't so much as *greet* that person. You shouldn't receive that person into your home. John said the same thing Paul said: Don't meet with false believers. Do not associate with them. Remove the evil from among you. Let them be anathema! Do not even eat with them. Do not even greet them or welcome them into your home.

A lot of Christians don't really take these verses too seriously. But as we're seeing, this was taught repeatedly throughout the New Testament. It was serious enough for the apostles to mention over and over again. Clearly God takes it seriously.

Why is it so important for Christians to refuse to associate with, eat with, greet or welcome one of these false brothers? Because, as John said, if you associate with them or greet them, you're participating in their evil work. You're helping them. These people are leading others into destruction.<sup>3</sup> People are dying because of them. Their disease is spreading. Paul called them servants of Satan.<sup>4</sup> John called them the antichrist.<sup>5</sup> They're working for the enemy, and if we help them, we're joining them in working for the enemy.

Just because someone calls themselves a Christian doesn't mean they're living for God. Just because they call Jesus “Lord” doesn't mean they're

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<sup>1</sup> 2 John 9-11

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9-11, 3:9-11, 3:13-18, 3:23, 4:7-12, 4:16-21, 5:1-3; 2 John 4-6; 3 John 5-8

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:24-30; Ephesians 5:6-7; 2 Thessalonians 2:8-12; 2 Peter 2:1-22; Jude 3-15

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29

doing his work.<sup>1</sup> The false prophets in Israel thought they were teaching the word of the Lord. The Pharisees thought they were doing God's work. False brothers and sisters think they're servants of the light. But they're not – they're servants of Satan.

Jesus said, "Anyone who is not with me is against me, and anyone who does not gather with me scatters."<sup>2</sup>

If they're not doing what Jesus said to do, then they are working against Jesus. Even if they think they're working for him. God takes this seriously. God hates what they do. Unfortunately, Christians don't take it as seriously as God does.

Becoming a Christian is not just about choosing to live a life of love; it's choosing a side in an ongoing war. The Kingdom of God is at war with the kingdom of darkness. If people are fighting for the enemy, we cannot join them in their fight. If your king tells you to join a battle and fight, and you line up in the ranks of the enemy, you're not working for your king. You're a traitor.

When Christians help an apostate Church spread apostasy, they're betraying Jesus. When Christians join ranks with an apostate Church, sit under their teaching, associate with them, become members with them, and treat them as fellow believers, it doesn't matter if they're hoping to change something or trying to be a good influence. They're putting their stamp of approval on people who refuse to obey God. They're showing everyone around them that they think you can reject God's commands and still be a Christian. They're participating in the work of the enemy.

They're betraying Jesus.

We must keep ourselves separate. We must keep ourselves different. We must be holy. It doesn't mean you can't reach out to them. It doesn't mean you can't call them to repent and show them what it means to really follow Jesus. It doesn't mean you can't love them! But it does mean you stop participating in their evil work. You don't join their churches. You don't help them preach a false gospel. You don't become one of them. You don't join yourself to them.

Paul said, "Do not join yourselves to unbelievers. Good and bad do not belong together. Light and darkness cannot share together. How can Christ and Belial have any agreement? What can a believer share in common with a nonbeliever? What union can the temple of God have with idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God said: 'I will live with them and walk with them. And I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore come out from their midst, and be separate, says the Lord. Touch nothing that

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 6:46; 2 Corinthians 11:4

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:23

is unclean, and I will accept you.”<sup>1</sup>

Christians must begin recognizing fruit. We must start judging the Church.<sup>2</sup> We must begin to recognize that if someone claims that they know God, but they don’t obey his commands, they’re liars and the truth isn’t in them.<sup>3</sup> We must recognize that, according to John, if someone says, “I am in the light,” but they don’t live a life of radical love, then they’re still in darkness.<sup>4</sup> That means they’re unbelievers. And we need to respond accordingly.

We cannot join ourselves to unbelievers. Good and bad don’t belong together. Light and darkness cannot share together. If those false believers are “servants of Satan” and “the antichrist,”<sup>5</sup> then how can Christ and Belial have any agreement? What can a believer share in common with an unbeliever? If, as Paul said, they’re accepting a different Jesus, a different gospel, and a different spirit than what was taught in Scripture,<sup>6</sup> then they’re accepting a different god – a false god, an idol.

What union can the temple of God have with idols?

God instructs us to come out from their midst and be separate. He tells us to touch nothing that is unclean. If we keep ourselves separate and touch nothing that is unclean, then he promises to accept us.

The Bible doesn’t just warn us about false believers and then leave it at that. It doesn’t just tell us the Church will fall away and become apostate and then leave it up to us what to do about it. No, the Bible tells us what to do. It tells us over and over again. We have everything we need in Scripture. It says to avoid those people. Remove the evil person among you. Do not associate with them. Withdraw from them. Stay away from them. Separate yourselves. Let them be anathema. Do not even eat with them. Do not greet them or welcome them into your home. Come out from their midst. Touch nothing that is unclean. Do not join yourselves to them.

We’re not commanded to keep meeting together with them.

When Hebrews told us to keep meeting together, it has a context. It was telling us to meet together in order to provoke one another to show radical love and do good deeds.<sup>7</sup> It was telling us that we can’t deliberately go on sinning, or we’re not truly Christians.<sup>8</sup> It told us to persevere through sufferings, keep loving those who are suffering, and maintain joy through

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:14-17

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 5:12-13

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:4

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:9-11

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 1 John 2:18-29

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:4

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:24-25

<sup>8</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:26-31

persecution without giving up.<sup>1</sup> It told us to not throw away our boldness, but to persevere with faith.<sup>2</sup> Then it told us about all the examples of people in Scripture who are witnesses testifying what real faith looks like – that it’s an action, not just a belief.<sup>3</sup>

Hebrews wasn’t telling us to keep having some religious meeting. It was telling us to live in radical love as the body of Jesus.

As we read through the Bible, it’s important to remember that Paul said the things that happened to the people in the Old Testament were written down as warnings for us – examples to us so that we don’t end up doing the same things they did.<sup>4</sup> So, when we read the stories in the Old Testament, we need to look for what those stories are teaching us – what do they tell us about what our lives should or should not look like?

There is one story in particular which is referenced a few times in the New Testament, but many Christians don’t fully understand what the story teaches. After God brought the Israelites out of Egypt, as they were wandering through the wilderness they came to the region of the Moabites and the Midianites.<sup>5</sup> The king of Moab, named Balak, was afraid of the Israelites because they had heard about the amazing things God had done for them. So, Balak hired a man named Balaam to curse Israel. But God told Balaam not to curse Israel. Balaam didn’t curse Israel; instead, he blessed them. Then he left.

The next time we read about Balaam is a several chapters later where he is listed among the dead after Israel went to war with the Midianites.<sup>6</sup> The Israelites had killed him. He hadn’t cursed them; he has blessed them. But they killed him. Moses mentioned in passing that the Midianites had followed Balaam’s advice and had turned the people of Israel away from the Lord.<sup>7</sup> He was referencing an event which is recorded in Numbers, but Balaam’s name wasn’t mentioned in that story.

However, if we look outside of the Old Testament at some of the other ancient Jewish texts we have available to us, we can see more of what Balaam did.

For example, Josephus, a Jewish historian who lived at the same time as the apostles, wrote that after God told Balaam not to curse Israel, Balaam still wanted to receive the money the Midianites offered him. So, Balaam told

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:32-34

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Hebrews 10:35-39

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Hebrews 11:1-12:1

<sup>4</sup> Ref. 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Numbers 22-24

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Numbers 31:8

<sup>7</sup> Ref. Numbers 31:15-16

the Midianites that if they could get Israel to sin against God, God himself would punish Israel. He also told them how – if the Midianite women seduced the Israelite men, they could get those men to turn away from the Lord and worship the Midianite gods.<sup>1</sup>

This was something God had warned the Israelites about beforehand. He said, “Be careful that you don’t make an agreement with the people who live in that land. When they worship their gods, they will invite you to join them. Then you will eat their sacrifices. If you take some of their daughters as wives for your sons and those daughters worship gods, they will lead your sons to do the same thing.”<sup>2</sup>

This was the teaching of Balaam.

Essentially, Balaam taught the Midianites to intermingle and intermarry with Israel. Israel joined themselves to foreign women, and those foreign women led the people of Israel away from God. In New Testament terms, God’s people joined themselves to unbelievers. They didn’t keep themselves separate. And this led them astray. The leaven got in, and it began to spread.

It’s the exact same warning Paul gave us about apostasy. If we don’t keep the leaven out of the Church – if we join ourselves to unbelievers – the apostasy will spread, and people will be led astray. Balaam is mentioned numerous times throughout the New Testament. His story is a story we’re supposed to remember. It’s a warning for us today: Do not join yourselves to people who do not follow God, or they will lead you away from God.

When Peter wrote about false believers in the Church, he said, “These false teachers abandoned the right road and went astray, following the way Balaam went. Balaam, the son of Beor, loved being paid for doing wrong.”<sup>3</sup>

Jude also mentioned Balaam when describing false believers: “They have followed the way of Cain, and because of greed they have poured themselves out to doing the error that Balaam did.”<sup>4</sup>

When Jesus wrote a letter to the church in Pergamum, he said, “I have a few things against you: You have some there who follow the teaching of Balaam. He taught Balak how to put a stumbling block before the children of Israel by eating food offered to idols and by taking part in sexual sins... So repent. If you do not, I will come to you quickly and make war against them with the sword that comes out of my mouth.”<sup>5</sup>

The story of Balaam is a warning for us today. It’s the same warning we see repeated all throughout the New Testament: Do not join yourselves to

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Josephus’ *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.6.6 - 4.6.13

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 34:15-16

<sup>3</sup> 2 Peter 2:15

<sup>4</sup> Jude 11

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 2:14-16



unbelievers. They will lead you into sin. They will lead you away from God. They will lead you into destruction. Notice how serious Jesus takes this. He said that if you follow what Balaam taught, he will come against you and make war against you with the sword that comes out of his mouth.

In Numbers we see something similar as the result of Balaam's teaching.

The Israelites joined themselves to unbelievers and were led astray to worship false gods. The result was that God made war against them. He sent a plague, and twenty-four thousand people died. The only reason the plague stopped was because a man named Phinehas rose up and removed the evil person from among them. God commended him, saying, "He hates sin as much as I do."<sup>1</sup>

God hates sin. We cannot join ourselves to people who are okay with sin. Sin simply means living contrary to the commands of God. We're commanded to live a radical lifestyle of love. We're commanded to abandon this world. We're commanded to be undistracted. We're commanded to make sure there are absolutely no needy people among us.

We're following the teaching of Balaam when we join ourselves to people who call themselves Christians but refuse to live this way. Jesus said if we do this, he will make war against us. That's not something we want!

Think about it this way:

When Paul proclaimed the Gospel, he always made sure to go to the Jews first.<sup>2</sup>

Why? Because they were God's people. They were God's chosen people. They were the ones God had called. And the only reason they were not his people anymore is because they were unfaithful; so, Paul went to them and called them to repent and follow God. Paul went to their synagogues and preached the truth. But Paul didn't tell them to keep attending their synagogues and stay joined to all the other Jews who rejected the truth. No. They followed Paul out of the synagogues. Paul taught them to start meeting with one another – to form their own group. They stopped going to the synagogues. They stopped associating with those who claimed to be God's people, but who had rejected God's truth about how we should live.

As we've seen throughout this book, if the Church today looks like the Jews in the New Testament period, the same concept applies. Leave the "synagogues." Meet with one another – with other true Christians who want to live radically for God, following the commands we have in Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 25:10

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Romans 1:16; Acts 13:5, 13:14-43, 14:1, 17:2, 17:17, 18:4-8, 18:19, 19:8

The teaching of the New Testament is clear: If we see people who call themselves believers, but they're not living the way Jesus taught to live, our response should be to separate, to stay away, to not even eat with them, to not even greet them, to not welcome them into our homes.

This was what the apostles taught to all the early churches in the first century. True Christians must keep themselves separate from false Christians. They must not associate with apostasy. The Church is supposed to stay separate.

But that's not what the Church did.

As we saw in the last chapter, something big happened shortly after Paul died. Apostasy flooded the Church. Gangrene entered the body. The leaven got in, and it spread. The whole batch of dough began to rise.

Things today are vastly different than they were when Paul wrote his letters. Today, it's not just one or two people who are living in apostasy and need to be removed from the Church. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he told them to remove the evil person from among them. But today, apostasy is by far the majority. You can't remove the false believer from among you. The only thing you really could do is remove yourself from among them.

Things seem a bit different. But the same concept applies.

The apostles warned us that apostasy was coming; they warned us that the Church was going to fall away. Paul said it was coming "in the last days."<sup>1</sup> For us to understand what to do about rampant apostasy in the Church today, we need to understand what the phrase "in the last days" meant when Paul used it.

So, let's look at a little bit of background quickly...

The phrase "in the last days" is a phrase often misunderstood by Christians today. They think "the last days" refers to only the last few years before Jesus returns. They think of the *Left Behind* series. They picture seven years of terrible times right before Jesus returns. But that's a mindset Christians only have because they read their own ideas into the text. They don't understand the worldview of the original audience, and how the original audience would have understood what Paul said.

The phrase "the last days" was a phrase often used during the time of the early Church. It was a phrase that came from their worldview. In the ancient Jewish worldview, they believed that the world would exist for 6,000 years. Those 6,000 years would represent the 6 days of creation, because as Moses said, "To the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 3:1-9

years is like one day.”<sup>1</sup>

So, they believed that the world would exist for 6,000 years, which would represent the six days of creation. So, every thousand years is one day. They believed there would be 2,000 years (i.e., two days) from creation until Abraham (which there were). They called it “the era of desolation.” Then they believed there would be 2,000 years (i.e., two days) from Abraham until the Messiah (which there were). They called this “the era of Torah.” Then, they anticipated 2,000 years (i.e., two days) of what was called the “Messianic Era.” This was the worldview of the Jews – even the ones who didn’t accept Jesus.

The Messiah arrived right when they were expecting. But they didn’t accept who he was. They expected the Messiah to come at that time because that was the end of the Era of Torah and the beginning of the Messianic Era. And they anticipated 2,000 years of the Messianic Era.

Furthermore, in the book of Revelation, we see one more day added – a day of rest coinciding with the seventh day of creation. Revelation says that the devil will be imprisoned for a thousand years and Christ will reign with his people.<sup>2</sup>

When the writers of the New Testament referred to “the last days,” they were referring to those last two days of creation – the last two days before the day of rest. In other words, they were referring to the Messianic Era – the entire time-period that has existed between Jesus’ first coming, and when he eventually returns. That entire period is called “the last days.”

This is why the apostles referred to the time they lived in as the last days.<sup>3</sup> The Messiah came during their lifetime. The Messianic Era had begun. The Last Days had begun. They lived in the last days. And today, we still live in the last days.

Why is all this important?

Because Paul told us what to expect during the last days – during the age of the Messiah, during the time-period between Jesus’ first coming and his second coming. Paul told us what to expect. He told us what the Church would look like, and he told us how to respond.

We need to come to grips with the fact that he was talking about the time-period we live in. He wasn’t describing a future “end times” scenario that we’re still waiting for. He was talking about everything that’s happened in the last two thousand years. He was talking about the time-period we currently live in. He was warning us. He was describing what the Church looks like today. And he told us how we’re supposed to respond.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Peter 3:8 which is quoting Psalm 90:4

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Revelation 20:1-6

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Acts 2:17; Hebrews 1:2; James 5:3; 1 Peter 1:20; 1 John 2:18; Jude 16

This is what Paul said: “Know this! In the last days there will be terrible times, because people will love themselves, love money, brag, and be proud. They will say evil things against others and will not obey their parents or be grateful or be holy. They will not love others, will refuse to forgive, will slander, and will not control themselves. They will be cruel, will not love what is good, will be traitors, and will be reckless. They will be conceited, will love pleasure instead of God, having an appearance of godliness but will not have its power. Avoid these people.”<sup>1</sup>

Remember, Paul told the Corinthians that when he said to not associate with people who live a certain way, he was not referring to those in the world – he was referring to those who call themselves believers and live that way. Therefore, this description in 2 Timothy 3:1-5 is a description of the Church. This is what the Church will look like in the last days. It will be terrible times.

Paul was saying it would no longer be one or two people who are living in apostasy and need to be removed from the Church. No, Paul was saying that apostasy would define the Church. The Church would be filled with people who live for themselves and think they’re living for the Lord. The Church would look just like ancient Israel when they rebelled against God. Paul was describing what the Church would look like throughout the last days.

If we live in the “last days,” then Paul was describing what the Church looks like *today*. If you understand what “the last days” meant in the worldview of Second Temple Judaism, then either this is an accurate description of how God currently views the Church... or Paul was a false prophet and nothing he wrote should even be considered Scripture.

But, if you understand what the commands of Jesus were, and what kind of lifestyle God wants his people to live, then it becomes clear... Paul’s description is spot on.

Just like Israel didn’t recognize their apostasy because, from their perspective, they didn’t think they had abandoned God... in the same way, many Christians don’t recognize that Paul was describing the Church today because, from their perspective, they don’t think this is an accurate description of Christians today.

But the Bible isn’t written from a human perspective. It’s written from God’s perspective. Paul’s description of the Church in the last days is an accurate description of the Church today because it’s God’s description from God’s perspective. The Church is full of people who don’t live in radical love. They don’t obey the commands of God. They look out for their own interests. They focus their lives around making money and having the kind of life they

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Timothy 3:1-5

want. They don't control their own desires. They don't share everything with brothers and sisters. They love pleasure. They lack the power of God – both the transforming power that makes us new people, and the power of the Kingdom that Jesus promised. His description is spot-on.

So, what do we do???

As people who want to live for the Lord, obeying his commands, seeking first the Kingdom, abandoning the things of this world, and living in radical love, what do we do about the current status of the Church?

I've heard pastors tell people to keep going to church. I've heard Christians say they think they're called to keep attending churches even though those churches are full of people who don't obey the commands of God. I've heard believers say that it's more important to meet together than it is to make sure we're meeting with people who are living the right way.

But these are all just human traditions.<sup>1</sup> These are human ideas.

The Bible tells us what to do: Touch nothing that is unclean. Be separate. Withdraw from them. Stay away from them. Let them be anathema. Do not associate with them. Do not join yourself to them. Do not even greet them. Do not even eat with them. Do not welcome them into your home. Avoid them.

This is the response the Bible instructs us to have. It doesn't say it just once. It says it over and over and over.

But so many Christians don't want to do it. They completely ignore these commands. They don't even think about them.

Why?

Because it doesn't seem right to them. It doesn't seem "loving."

But it's what the Bible says. If it doesn't seem right to you, or loving to you, but it's what the Bible says, then something is wrong with *you* – not the Bible. Something is wrong with your understanding or your definitions. We can't just ignore Bible verses because we don't like them.

And we can't just follow some argument about why we shouldn't do what the Bible clearly says to do. Is the Bible your standard, or is someone's argument your standard? The Bible says false teachers will try to persuade people with arguments that seem good but are false.<sup>2</sup> If we build our lives around what *seems* right rather than what the Bible says to do, then we're not actually following the Bible. We're following ourselves. We've made ourselves gods. We do what's right in our own eyes. Not what's right in God's eyes.

The Bible tells us that we need to be obeying the commands of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:3-9

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Colossians 2:4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-27, 25:31-46; Luke 6:46; John 8:31; 12:47-50; 1 John 2:3-6, 3:24

The Bible tells us what those commands are.<sup>1</sup> The Bible tells us that loving him means we obey him.<sup>2</sup> The Bible tells us that anyone who doesn't obey him isn't really a Christian.<sup>3</sup> And the Bible tells us what to do when people call themselves Christians, yet don't obey him.<sup>4</sup>

We have all our instructions. The only question is: Will we do it even if we don't like it?

Many Christians see problems in the Church, and they try to help. They try to change things. They get involved and try to make changes from the inside. I get it – we want to see those people change. But that's not what the Bible told us to do. The Bible told us to stay separate. The Bible told us to stay holy. The Bible told us to be different. If we want to actually help those people, we need to do it the way Jesus told us to do it – even if it doesn't make sense to us, and even if it seems foolish from a natural perspective.

Naturally, it makes sense to get involved and try to change things! But that wasn't what we were told to do. Jesus cares more about us shining as a light to those people. We can only shine if we're different. He knows what's best for us, and he knows what's best for them. What's best is for us to be separate and be different. And what's best for them is for us to shine as a light to them.

When Christians get involved in these churches and try to solve these problems, they're usually not recognizing the real issue: Those people don't love God. Jesus said that if we love him, we will obey him, and that only those who obey him actually love him.<sup>5</sup>

John told us that loving God means obeying his commands.<sup>6</sup> And he was very careful to tell us what those commands are.<sup>7</sup> So, if those people aren't obeying the commands of God to live a life defined by the radical love of Jesus, then those people don't love God. They love themselves. They love money. They love pleasure. They're following the pattern Paul warned us about.

Most modern churches are full of people who don't love God – even though they think they do. They've redefined *loving God* into having feelings, emotions, singing songs, and spending time with him. But the Bible says that loving God means we obey him. So, if those people don't obey God, then they don't love God. And if they don't love God, then when Christians get involved

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 13:34, 15:12; 1 John 3:11, 3:16-18, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21; 2 John 5-6; 3 John 5-8

<sup>2</sup> Ref. John 14:15, 14:21, 14:23; 1 John 5:3

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 1:5-7, 2:4, 2:9-11, 2:15, 3:6, 3:7-10, 3:16-18, 4:8, 4:20-21

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:13-14; 1 Corinthians 5:6-13; Galatians 1:8-9; Romans 16:17-18; Ephesians 5:6-7; 1 Timothy 6:3-5, 6:20-21; 2 Timothy 2:16-17, 3:1-5; 2 John 9-11; 2 Corinthians 6:14-17; 2 Peter 2:15; Jude 11; Revelation 2:14-16

<sup>5</sup> Ref. John 14:15, 21, 23

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 1 John 5:3

<sup>7</sup> Ref. John 13:34, 15:12; 1 John 3:11, 3:16-18, 4:7-12, 4:16, 4:19-21; 2 John 5-6; 3 John 5-8

in their churches and try to change things, they're actually trying to solve a problem that they're not able to solve. The problem isn't that those people need to mature. The problem is that those people aren't saved. That's why we're told to not associate with them.

It doesn't mean we don't evangelize to them. It doesn't mean we don't shine as a light to them. It doesn't mean we don't try to influence them from the outside. But it does mean we don't become one of them. Jude said, "Rescue others by snatching them from the fire. Show mercy mixed with fear to others, hating even their clothes which are stained by the flesh."<sup>1</sup>

We want to show mercy to others. We want to rescue them from the fire. But we should also hate even their clothes which are stained by sin. Or, as Paul said, we should touch nothing that is unclean. We can't join them. We can't unite with them. If, as Jude said, these people are in the fire, then we need to start recognizing what we're actually doing: we're rescuing them from destruction.

Essentially, recognize that they're not Christians, and stop treating them like they are! As a Christian, would you go to a Muslim mosque because you feel the need to meet together? Of course not! It's a totally different religion. Meeting with them is not what Hebrews was telling us to do.

But the Bible tells us that apostate Christianity is a completely different religion, too.

Paul said they believe a different gospel, they accepted a different Jesus, and they received a different spirit.<sup>2</sup> Meeting with them and joining with them is an attempt to mix light with darkness. It's an attempt to join Christ and Belial together. The New Testament tells us time and time again to have nothing to do with people who call themselves Christians but live contrary to the commands of God.

But Christians reject what the Bible says. They don't want to live like that. Christians don't want to do this because they don't think it's loving. But that's only because they still think *love* means *being nice*.

Jesus wasn't nice when he drove the Pharisees out of the Temple with a whip.<sup>3</sup> Jesus wasn't nice when he called the Pharisees and Scribes hypocrites and blind guides who lead people into destruction.<sup>4</sup> Paul wasn't being nice when he called false brothers "servants of Satan" who "masquerade as servants of righteousness."<sup>5</sup> He wasn't being nice when he named Hymenaeus and

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<sup>1</sup> Jude 23

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:4

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48; John 2:13-17

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Matthew 15:7, 15:14, 23:17, 23:24, 23:26-27; Luke 12:1

<sup>5</sup> Ref. 2 Corinthians 11:13-15

Philetus by name and said that their teaching is like gangrene in the body.<sup>1</sup> Peter wasn't being nice when he called false brothers "ignorant," "unstable," and "lawless."<sup>2</sup> John wasn't being nice when he called them "the antichrist" or "children of the devil."<sup>3</sup> Jude wasn't being nice when he called them "twice dead."<sup>4</sup>

Love isn't about being nice; love is about doing what is best for others.

The Bible tells us that apostate Christians are not Christians at all. They're still dead. They're still lost. They're still in darkness. They need a light. Christians are not being a light if they join themselves to the darkness. Christians are only being a light if they're different than the darkness.

So, be different. Shine. Show them another way – don't join them in their way and merely tell them about another way. Remember, when Paul preached the gospel, he would go to the synagogues first – to the Jews first.<sup>5</sup> The reason he did that was because he was going first to God's people who were unfaithful. He was going to God's people who had committed apostasy. We must remember today when we try to reach these people – that's what we're doing. It's evangelism. It's not telling them they are evil, wicked, and horrible; it's not hating them. It's evangelizing. They are the lost sheep. They are wandering in the darkness. They've been taught the wrong thing. We need to love them. But we need to remember that evangelism for us is often going to look like going to the apostate people who have been taught the wrong things and are on the path to destruction and showing them the truth. A lot of them are not going to accept it. But some of them will.

We need to keep from getting angry and hating them because we think we're better than them. They are lost and they need their shepherd. They are in the darkness and they need light. We need to remember when we talk to them and try to reach them that what we're doing is evangelism. What we're doing is what Paul did when he went to the synagogues. He went to the Jews first. We need to go to the Christians first. We need to call them to repent – not out of anger or superiority, but because the Bible says that people must obey Jesus, but they're being taught that they must believe – and that obedience is not important. We need to show them the truth because that's what love does.

We must love them. We cannot approach them with hatred or anger or some superiority complex. We must approach them with love. But we also must be firm and stand for the truth. We need to learn how to walk that fine

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. 2 Timothy 2:16-18

<sup>2</sup> Ref. 2 Peter 3:16-17

<sup>3</sup> Ref. 1 John 2:18-29; 3:9-10; 2 John 7

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Jude 12

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Romans 1:16; Acts 13:5, 13:14-43, 14:1, 17:2, 17:17, 18:4-8, 18:19, 19:8



line between the two. We're not at all supposed to hate them. We're supposed to love them – and, *loving them* means doing what's best for them – whether they want or not.

It is not love to join them. It is not love to help them preach a false gospel. It is not love to allow them to keep thinking they're on a road to life when they're really on a road to destruction. Loving them means separating yourself and shining. It means being different so they can see the difference between what God says is good and what God says is evil.

Jesus said, "You are the light that gives light to the world. A city that is built on a hill cannot be hidden. And people don't light a lamp and then hide it under a basket. They put it on a lampstand so the light shines for all the people in the house. In the same way let your light shine for people to see, so that they will see the good things you do and will praise your Father in heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Do not hide your light under a basket by joining yourself to darkness. Let your light shine by staying separate. Let your light shine by being different. Let your light shine by refusing to compromise.

First and foremost, we're called to love "one another;" that means other true believers. Paul said, "When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of faith."<sup>2</sup>

The Church is supposed to be a community of people who look out for one another instead of themselves. It's supposed to be a community of people who have no needs whatsoever because everyone is meeting the needs of the other people, and no one is living in excess.<sup>3</sup>

It's supposed to be like an ant colony: Every ant in the colony works hard for the good of the whole colony. No ant is just looking out for himself. It works because every ant is doing it – every ant is living that way! In the kingdom of God, it works because everyone who is full of the Spirit will do it. But it requires that everyone does it. It requires that everyone lives that way, looks out for the good of others, and builds up the body rather than looking out for themselves and making sure their own needs are met. Yes, we should help those outside the Church too, when we're able. But first and foremost, we should help those within the true Church.

If those within the true Church begin to live this way – separating themselves from those who refuse to live this way, and joining themselves to

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:14-16

<sup>2</sup> Galatians. 6:10

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Deuteronomy 14:28-29, 15:7-11; Luke 12:33; Acts 2:42-46, 4:32-35; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; Philippians 2:1-8

those who accept this radical lifestyle – then the world will see this true Church as a community of people defined by a radical love no one else has ever witnessed. They will see a community of people looking out for one another as a higher priority than themselves. They will see a community of people where no one has any needs whatsoever. They will see a community of people who begin to encounter the power of God’s Kingdom. A light will begin to shine in the darkness.<sup>1</sup> As Jesus said, “All people will know that you are my followers if you love one another.”<sup>2</sup>

And he also prayed, “Father, I ask that they can be one. As you are in me, and I am in you, I ask that they can also be one in us. Then the world will believe that you sent me. I have given these people the glory that you gave me so that they can be one, just as you and I are one. I in them and you in me so that they will be in perfect unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you loved them just as much as you loved me.”<sup>3</sup>

If we love one another, all people will know we’re his followers. If we are in perfect unity like the first Church in Acts,<sup>4</sup> then the world will believe that the Father sent Jesus and that the Father loves us just as much as he loves Jesus. This cannot happen if we’re joined to people who won’t participate. This cannot happen if we’re joined to people who refuse to accept the lifestyle Jesus taught. If we stay joined to the false church, all people will not know that we’re his followers... because we won’t look any different than anyone else. There will be no love. There will be no light.

I challenge anyone who wants to truly live for the Lord: find other true believers who are willing to live radically. They’re out there. Many of them feel as lonely as you do. Find them. Find them by talking to people. Find them by challenging the status quo. Find them by talking to everyone. Rock the boat. Learn who is willing to get on board and who is not. The truth sets people free. The truth gives them life. So, don’t keep it quiet.

Paul said, “It is written in the Scriptures, ‘I believed, so I spoke.’ Our faith is like this, too. We also believe, and so we speak.”<sup>5</sup>

When you speak, expect some persecution. The New Testament is clear: if you want to live the right way, you will be persecuted.<sup>6</sup> The prophets were persecuted – but remember, they were persecuted by “God’s people.” Jesus was persecuted by “God’s people.” The early Church was, first and

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. John 13:35, 17:20-23; Philippians 1:27-28

<sup>2</sup> John 13:35

<sup>3</sup> John 17:21-23

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Acts 4:32-35

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:13

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Matthew 5:10-12, 10:16-20, 24:9-13; Luke 6:22-23, 6:26, 21:12-19; John 15:18-21, 16:1-4; Acts 14:21-22; Romans 8:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:1-4; 2 Timothy 2:12, 3:12

foremost, persecuted by “God’s people.” Expect it to be the same today. Most Christians won’t accept the truth. Most Christians won’t like what you have to say.

But, as you begin to speak the truth, hopefully you’ll also find other true believers. Perhaps you’ll convert some false believers into being real Christians. When you do, meet with them. Become one with them. Join forces with them. Become a family. Share everything in common. Stand strong with one mind and one heart like Acts says we should.<sup>1</sup>

But only meet together with true believers who build their lives around what the Bible says. Only join yourselves with people who have accepted the extraordinary, radical lifestyle that Jesus and the apostles preached. Only become family with people who truly seek first the Kingdom in everything they do. Only become one with people who have truly died and risen again with Jesus. Start judging the trees by their fruit.

Stop accepting anything less. Stop joining yourselves to darkness. Stop trying to be one with people who prove by their actions that they hate God. And if someone joins but then proves through their actions that they’re not living this way, and they’re not going to repent, remove the leaven. Remove the evil person among you.

Apostasy swept through the Church nearly two thousand years ago. Paul warned us that the last days would be terrible times because of the apostasy of the Church – because the Church would become a dead Church and God’s people would refuse to obey God. His prediction has proven to be true. For nearly two thousand years, the Church has led wars, slaughtered millions, accumulated wealth, acquired comfort, and neglected the needy. For nearly two thousand years, the Church has been filled with people who look out for their own interests above the interests of others.

These are the last days. Christians need to recognize it. They need to judge a tree by its fruit. They need to separate themselves.

The gates of Hell cannot stand against the Church.<sup>2</sup> But it has to be the real Church – the real congregation of God’s people, the real bride of Christ, the real body of Christ, the real Temple of God.

Here is a secret: Jesus and John both said that those who claim to be children of God, but don’t obey his commands, are actually children of the devil.<sup>3</sup> Our King stood up and issued a challenge to the devil and his children:

“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days... the temple

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Acts 4:32-35; Philippians 1:27-28

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 16:18

<sup>3</sup> Ref. John 8:42-44; 1 John 3:7-10

Jesus meant was his own body.”<sup>1</sup>

The children of the devil accepted his challenge. The children of the devil destroyed God’s Temple. The children of the devil killed the body of Christ.

But the “last days” are nearly over.

The third day is about to dawn.

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<sup>1</sup> John 2:19, 21

# Chapter 24

## So, Now What?

Throughout this book, we've been pointing out examples of ways that Christianity has become polluted and ways that it has strayed far from what Biblical Christianity – the Christianity of the book of Acts – was always meant to be. We have become a dead Church. It's time for that to end. It's time for us to repent and follow Jesus like he originally intended.

It's time that we become real Christians.

We've come to just accept and believe so many lies in the Western Church – lies about repentance, faith, love, legalism, condemnation, what the Christian life should look like, what it's like to have the Spirit, and even lies about the Gospel itself! It's time that we recognize what the apostles meant when they said the Church would become apostate.

Just like ancient Israel, and just like the Pharisees, the Church has largely become a group of people who honor God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him.<sup>1</sup> They are dead.

If we want to stop being dead, we must stop following men, and we must start obeying God.

Ancient Israel had the Law of Moses. It told them what God wanted their lives to look like. But instead of following what was clearly instructed in Scripture, they followed the teachings of their false prophets and false teachers.<sup>2</sup> The Church today has more than just the Law of Moses – we have both the Old Testament and the New Testament. All of it clearly tells us what God wants our lives to look like. And the apostles warned us that just like Israel had false prophets and false teachers, we will also have false prophets and false teachers.<sup>3</sup>

It's time we recognize that this is the reality we live in.

The question is: Are we going to follow the teachings of men, or are we going to strictly follow what Scripture directly says, looking into it ourselves without relying on some man to explain it to us?

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Isaiah 29:13; Jeremiah 12:2; Matthew 15:3-9; Mark 7:6-8

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Isaiah 3:12; Jeremiah 8:8-9, 14:14-16, 23:9-32; Lamentations 2:14; Ezekiel 13; Micah 2:6-11; Malachi 2:8

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:15-20, 24:11, 24:24-25; Acts 20:29-31; 2 Timothy 4:3-5; 2 Peter 2

If you've read this book and you feel overwhelmed about how many lies you need to tear down before you can rebuild and figure out what the truth really is... don't be discouraged! The best place to be is in a place where you're aware that the Holy Spirit is the only one that can teach you, and you're asking questions.<sup>1</sup>

So, start asking. Keep asking.<sup>2</sup> Keep searching for the truth – even if it's going to turn your life upside-down. And when you do learn something, when you do see the Bible showing you some way your life needs to change, don't wait to have everything else figured out. Do that thing that you already know from Scripture. Don't hesitate. Be all in.

We named this book *Dead Church* because that was the description Jesus gave to the church in Sardis who had the reputation for being alive.<sup>3</sup> The Church in the Western world has the same reputation; everyone looks at it and thinks it represents what Christianity really is. Many people within the Church think they're alive because they compare themselves to everyone around them. But Jesus said, "You have a reputation that you are alive, but really you are dead... I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants."<sup>4</sup>

If we decide what to do by comparing ourselves to everyone around us, then we might find out that what we're doing is not what God wants.

Why is the modern Church dead? It's dead because it still holds onto what it thinks is life. If you want true life, you must die.<sup>5</sup> Jesus said that if we want to find life, we must lose our lives. We can only enter life with Jesus if we first decide to stop living in death.

Jesus didn't leave Sardis without hope. He called them to repent – to change their lives and live for him.<sup>6</sup>

When you look at your own life, do you see someone who has completely rejected this world? Do you see someone who has given up the cares of this life, the riches, the possessions, the comfort, the entertainment, the pleasures, and the wisdom of this world? Do you see someone who has died and has been raised into new life as a new creation with a new nature? Are you different from the world around you? Truly different – not just calling yourself different because the Church always calls themselves different? Would the world look at you and think you are crazy? Would the religious Church look at you and think you are radical? Can you honestly say – just between you

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 23:8; John 14:26, 16:12-14; 1 John 2:26-27

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 7:7-11; Luke 11:9-13; Hebrews 11:6

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:1-6

<sup>4</sup> Revelation 3:1-2

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Matthew 10:38-39, 16:24-25; Mark 8:34-35; Luke 9:23-24, 14:27, 17:33; John 12:2-25, 15:12-13; Romans 6:1-14; 2 Corinthians 5:14-15; Galatians 2:19-21, 6:14-15; Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 2:11-12, 2:20, 3:1-3, 3:9-10

<sup>6</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:3

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and God – that you are only concerned about the Kingdom of God, that it's all you care about, all you think about, and the only thing driving you in every decision you make?<sup>1</sup> Can you honestly say that you've laid everything down? Are you like Jesus' disciples who dropped everything – their livelihood, their families, and their friends – to follow Jesus?<sup>2</sup>

If you can't honestly say that you are radically living for the Kingdom of God, then why aren't you?

What is it that you're not convinced about yet? What is it that makes you think it's not valuable enough to give up everything like the man in Jesus' parables did?<sup>3</sup> What is more important to you than having life?

If you read the book of Acts and want to have the kind of life you see in those stories, the answer is simple: Repent of the old life, stop being focused on this life, and just start obeying.

The only way for a dead Church to come alive is for the dead Church to die – to die with Jesus and resurrect with him into true life.

But don't wait! When God sent the prophets to ancient Israel, he gave them a chance to repent, but he also gave them a time limit. He told them that the day of the Lord was coming.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Jesus may have given Sardis hope – he gave them a chance to repent – but he also gave them a time limit. He told them that if they didn't repent, he would come like a thief in the night against them.<sup>5</sup>

The dead Church has an opportunity to repent – an opportunity to change everything and get their lives in line with what God wants. But there's a day coming, and it will not delay. If the dead Church does not repent, the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and it will be a day of judgment against the very same people who are eagerly awaiting his return.

“How terrible it will be for you who want the day of the LORD to come. Why do you want that day to come? It will bring darkness for you, not light... it will be deep gloom, not brightness.”<sup>6</sup>

“I know your works. You have a reputation that you are alive, but really you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what you have

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<sup>1</sup> Ref. Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:31; Romans 12:1-2, 14:7-8; 1 Corinthians 4:9-16, 7:29-35, 10:31-11:1; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11, 5:15; Galatians 1:10; Philippians 2:17, 3:7-11; Colossians 3:2; Titus 3:14; 1 Peter 1:13-25, 2:11-12

<sup>2</sup> Ref. Matthew 4:17-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11, 5:27-28

<sup>3</sup> Ref. Matthew 13:44-46

<sup>4</sup> Ref. Joel 1:15, 2:1-2; Amos 5:18-20

<sup>5</sup> Ref. Revelation 3:3

<sup>6</sup> Amos 5:18, 20

left before it dies completely. I have found that what you are doing is less than what my God wants. So do not forget what you have received and heard. Obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you...<sup>1</sup>

“I know your works, that you are not hot or cold. I wish that you were hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm – neither hot, nor cold – I am ready to vomit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich, and I have become wealthy and do not need anything.’ But you do not know that you are really miserable, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. I advise you to buy from me gold refined by fire so you can be truly rich. Buy from me white clothes so you can be clothed and so you can cover your shameful nakedness. Buy from me medicine to put on your eyes so you can truly see.

“I rebuke and discipline those whom I love. So be eager to do right, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you will eat with me.

“Those who overcome will sit with me on my throne in the same way that I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.

“Everyone who has ears should hear and obey what the Spirit says to the churches.”<sup>2</sup>

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We’ve been discussing what love looks like and what it means to obey the commands of God. Perhaps you’re like I was – I knew we were supposed to love, but I didn’t realize how much the Bible defines love! I didn’t realize how much the Bible talks about helping the poor, helping widows, helping orphans, helping those in need, making sure their needs are met, and not trying to profit off them. I didn’t realize how much the Bible shows what true love is.

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<sup>1</sup> Revelation 3:1-3

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 3:15-22



Even though we have referenced hundreds of verses throughout this book, in this chapter I want to demonstrate that the Bible (from the beginning to the end) does not just tell us to love one another – it tells us what love *means*. From cover to cover, the Bible taught the same message – God commanded us to love one another, and God told us what that looks like, practically. He taught us what real love is over and over again. And by telling us over and over again, he demonstrated that this is something he deeply cares about.

If it's something that God cares a lot about, then it's something we should care a lot about, too.

The point of this chapter is so that you can see just how often the Bible talks about this. I'm not including every verse in the Bible on this subject – I'm actually only covering a small fraction of them. But I want you to be able to get an idea of the full picture of what the Bible teaches about love.

We're going to look at stories about righteous people and what they did. We're going to look at things that God said he does. We're going to look at commands that we have. We're going to look at who the gospel was preached to, and who the kingdom of God is for.

I'm not going to get into any commentary with these verses, because we've been discussing these concepts throughout *Dead Church*. This chapter is meant simply for you to see many verses, all gathered into one place, that all demonstrate what God said he wants his people doing.

I highly recommend that you don't just skip over this because it's "just a bunch of Bible verses." Because if you're anything like I was, you probably don't realize how much the Bible talks about this! I didn't realize how much the Bible says we should be living the kind of life that we've talked about in this book.

So please read these verses. Think about what they're saying. Think about the examples set by those who lived righteously. Think about the commands God gave people and how they apply to you. Think about the significance of who Jesus said the kingdom of God is for, and who he was preaching the gospel to, and who the apostles were preaching to.

Think about how much the Bible addresses this topic, and whether or not you take it as seriously as God does.

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Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent during the hottest part of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When Abraham saw them, he ran from his tent to meet them. He bowed facedown

on the ground before them and said, “Sir, if I have found grace in your eyes, please stay awhile with me, your servant. I will bring some water so all of you can wash your feet. You may rest under the tree, and I will get some bread for you so you can regain your strength. Then you may continue your journey.

The three men said, “That is fine. Do as you said.”

Abraham hurried to the tent where Sarah was and said to her, “Hurry, prepare twenty quarts of fine flour, and make it into loaves of bread.” Then Abraham ran to his herd and took one of his best calves. He gave it to a servant, who hurried to kill it and to prepare it for food. Abraham gave the three men the calf that had been prepared and milk curds and milk. While they ate, he stood under the tree near them.<sup>1</sup>

...Lot was sitting near the city gate. When he saw them, he got up and went to them and bowed facedown on the ground. Lot said, “Sirs, please come to my house and spend the night. There you can wash your feet, and then tomorrow you may continue your journey.”

The angels answered, “No, we will spend the night in the city’s public square.”

But Lot begged them to come, so they agreed and went to his house. Then Lot prepared a feast for them. He baked bread without yeast, and they ate it.<sup>2</sup>

The servant said, “LORD, God of my master Abraham, allow me to find a wife for his son today. Please show this kindness to my master Abraham. Here I am, standing by the spring, and the girls from the city are coming out to get water. I will say to one of them, ‘Please put your jar down so I can drink.’ Then let her say, ‘Drink, and I will also give water to your camels.’ If that happens, I will know she is the right one for your servant Isaac and that you have shown kindness to my master.”

Before the servant had finished praying, Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel, came out of the city. (Bethuel was the son of Milcah and Nahor, Abraham’s brother.) Rebekah was carrying her water jar on her shoulder. She was extremely beautiful, a virgin; she had never known a man. She went down to the spring and filled her jar, then came back up. The servant ran to her and said, “Please give me a little water from your jar.”

Rebekah said, “Drink, sir.” She quickly lowered the jar from her shoulder and gave him a drink. After she let him drink all he wanted, Rebekah said, “I will also pour some water for your camels until they have finished

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 18:1-8

<sup>2</sup> Genesis 19:1-3

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drinking.” So she quickly emptied all the water from her jar into the drinking trough for the camels. Then she kept running to the well until she had given all the camels enough to drink.<sup>1</sup>

Do not maltreat or oppress a foreigner, because you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. Do not afflict a widow or an orphan. If you do, and they cry out to me for help, I certainly will hear their cry. And I will be very angry and kill you with the sword. Then your wives will become widows, and your children will become orphans.

If you lend money to one of my people who is poor, do not treat him as a creditor would. Take no interest. If your neighbor gives you his coat as a promise for the money he owes you, you must give it back to him by sunset, because his coat is the only cover to keep his body warm. He has nothing else to sleep in. If he cries out to me for help, I will hear, because I am merciful.<sup>2</sup>

You must not mistreat a foreigner. You know how it feels to be a foreigner, because you were foreigners in Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

When you harvest your crops on your land, do not harvest all the way to the corners of your fields. If grain falls onto the ground, don't gather it up. Don't pick all the grapes in your vineyards, and don't pick up the grapes that fall to the ground. You must leave those things for poor people and for people traveling through your country. I am the LORD your God.<sup>4</sup>

You must not keep a hired worker's salary all night until morning.<sup>5</sup>

Do not mistreat foreigners living in your country, but treat them just as you treat your own citizens. Love foreigners as you love yourselves, because you were foreigners one time in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.<sup>6</sup>

When you harvest your crops on your land, do not harvest all the way to the corners of your field. If grain falls onto the ground, don't gather it up. Leave it for poor people and foreigners in your country. I am the LORD your God.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 24:12-20

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 22:21-27

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 23:9

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 19:9-10

<sup>5</sup> Leviticus 19:13

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 23:22

If your brother becomes too poor to support himself, help him to live among you as you would a stranger or foreigner. Do not charge him any interest on money or try to make a profit, but fear your God; let the poor live among you. Don't lend him money for interest, and don't try to make a profit from the food he buys.<sup>1</sup>

Keep the Sabbath as a holy day, as the LORD your God has commanded you. You may work and get everything done during six days each week, but the seventh day is a day of rest to honor the LORD your God. On that day no one may do any work: not you, your son or daughter, your male or female slaves, your ox, your donkey, or any of your animals, or the foreigners living in your cities. That way your servants may rest as you do. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there by his strong hand and extended arm. So the LORD your God has commanded you to rest on the Sabbath day.<sup>2</sup>

The LORD owns the earth and everything in it – the heavens, even the highest heavens, are his. But the LORD stuck to and loved your fathers, and he chose you, their descendants, over all the other nations, just as it is today. Circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. The LORD your God is God of all gods and Lord of all lords. He is the great God, who is strong and wonderful. He does not show favoritism, and he will not be talked into doing evil. He helps orphans and widows, and he loves foreigners and gives them food and clothes. You also must love foreigners, because you were foreigners in Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

At the end of every third year, everyone would bring one-tenth of that year's crop and store it in your towns. This is for the Levites so they may eat and be full. (They have no land of their own among you.) It is also for foreigners, orphans, and widows who live in your towns so that all of them may eat and be full. Then the LORD your God will bless you and all the work you do.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of every seven years, you must tell those who owe you anything that they do not have to pay you back.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leviticus 25:35-37

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 5:12-15

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 10:14-19

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 14:28-29

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 15:1

If there are poor among you, in one of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be selfish or greedy toward them. But give freely to them, and freely lend them whatever they need. Beware of evil thoughts. Don't think, "The seventh year is near, the year to cancel what people owe." Your eye might be evil toward the needy and not give them anything. Then they will call out to the LORD about you, and he will find you guilty of sin. Give freely to the poor person, and do not wish that you didn't have to give. The LORD your God will bless your work and everything you touch. There will always be poor people in the land, so I command you to give freely to your neighbors and to the poor and needy in your land.<sup>1</sup>

If a poor person gives you a coat to show he will pay the loan back, don't keep it overnight. Give the coat back at sunset, because your neighbor needs that coat to sleep in, and he will be grateful to you. And the LORD your God will see that you have done a righteous thing.

Don't exploit hired servants who are poor and needy, whether they are fellow Israelites or foreigners living in one of your towns. Pay them each day before sunset, because they are poor and need the money. Otherwise, they may cry out to the LORD about you, and you will be guilty of sin.<sup>2</sup>

Do not be unfair to a foreigner or an orphan. Don't take a widow's coat to make sure she pays you back.<sup>3</sup>

When you are gathering your harvest in the field and forget a bundle of grain, don't go back and get it. Leave it there for foreigners, orphans, and widows so that the LORD your God can bless everything you do. When you beat your olive trees to knock the olives off, don't beat the trees a second time. Leave what is left for foreigners, orphans, and widows. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, don't pick the vines a second time. Leave what is left for foreigners, orphans, and widows. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt; that is why I am commanding you to do this.<sup>4</sup>

Anyone will be cursed who is unfair to foreigners, orphans, or widows.<sup>5</sup>

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen, my daughter. Don't go to gather grain for

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<sup>1</sup> Deuteronomy 15:7-11

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 24:12-15

<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 24:17

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 24:19-22

<sup>5</sup> Deuteronomy 27:19

yourself in another field. Don't even leave this field at all, but continue following closely behind my servant girls. Watch to see into which fields they go to cut grain and follow them. I will warn the young men not to bother you. When you are thirsty, you may go and drink from the water jugs that the young men have filled."<sup>1</sup>

At mealtime Boaz told Ruth, "Come here. Eat some of our bread and dip it in our sauce." So Ruth sat down beside the workers. Boaz handed her some roasted grain, and she ate until she was full; she even had some food left over. When Ruth rose and went back to work, Boaz commanded his young men, "Let her gather even around the piles of cut grain. Don't tell her to go away. In fact, pull out some full heads of grain for her from the bundles and let her gather them. Don't tell her to stop."<sup>2</sup>

Those who were well fed now hire themselves out for food, but people who were hungry are hungry no more... The LORD raises the poor up from the dust, and he lifts the needy from the ashes. He lets the poor sit with princes and they inherit a throne of honor.<sup>3</sup>

The LORD defends those who are oppressed; he defends them in times of trouble.<sup>4</sup>

Proudly the wicked chase down the poor... they watch in secret for the helpless. They wait in hiding like a lion. They wait to catch poor people; they catch the poor in nets and drag them off. The poor are crushed and thrown down; they are defeated because the others are stronger. LORD, rise up and punish the wicked. Don't forget those who are oppressed. The helpless look to you for help. You are the one who helps the orphans. LORD, you have heard what the poor people want. Do what they ask and listen to them. Protect the orphans and the oppressed so they will no longer be afraid of evil people.<sup>5</sup>

But the LORD says, "I will now rise up, because the poor are being hurt. Because of the moans of the helpless, I will give them the victory they want."<sup>6</sup>

The wicked frustrate the plans of the poor, but the LORD will protect

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<sup>1</sup> Ruth 2:8-9

<sup>2</sup> Ruth 2:14-16

<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 2:5,8

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 9:9

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 10:2,8-10,12,14,17-18

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 12:5

them.<sup>1</sup>

LORD, who may abide in your Holy Tent? Who may live on your holy mountain? Only those who are innocent and who do righteousness. Such people speak the truth from their hearts and do not tell lies about others. They do no wrong to their neighbors and do not gossip. They do not respect hateful people but honor those who fear the LORD. They keep their promises to their neighbors, even when it hurts. They do not charge interest on money they lend and do not take money to hurt innocent people. Whoever does all these things will never be moved.<sup>2</sup>

The wicked borrow and don't pay back, but the righteous give freely to others.<sup>3</sup>

Blessed are those who care for the poor. When trouble comes, the LORD will save them. The LORD will protect them and spare their life and will bless them in the land. He will not let their enemies take them. The LORD will give them strength when they are sick, and he will make them well again.<sup>4</sup>

God is in his holy Temple. He is a father to orphans, and he defends the widows. God gives the lonely a home. He leads prisoners out with joy...<sup>5</sup>

The LORD listens to those in need and does not look down on prisoners.<sup>6</sup>

God, give the king your good judgment and the king's son your righteousness. Help him judge your people fairly and decide what is just for the poor. Let there be peace on the mountains and righteousness on the hills for the people. Help him be fair to the poor and save the needy and punish those who oppress them... He will protect the poor when they cry out and the needy when no one else will help. He will be kind to the poor and the needy, and he will save their lives. He will save them from cruel people who try to hurt them, because their lives are precious to him.<sup>7</sup>

God presides in the assembly of the gods; he judges among the "gods."

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 14:6

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 15

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 37:21

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 41:1-3

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 68:5-6

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 69:33

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 72:1-4;12-14

He says, “How long will you defend evil people? How long will you show greater kindness to the wicked? Defend the poor and the orphans; defend the rights of the poor and needy. Rescue the poor and helpless; protect them from the power of the wicked.”<sup>1</sup>

The LORD does what is righteous and just for all who are wronged by others.<sup>2</sup>

He satisfies the thirsty and fills up the hungry.<sup>3</sup>

But he lifted the poor out of their suffering and made their families grow like flocks of sheep. The upright see this and are happy, but the wicked say nothing. Whoever is wise will remember these things and will think about the love of the LORD.<sup>4</sup>

He stands at the right hand of the helpless and gives them victory over those who accuse them.<sup>5</sup>

It is good to be merciful and generous. Those who are fair in their business will never be defeated. Righteous people will always be remembered. They give freely to the poor. Their righteousness will continue forever. They will be given great honor.<sup>6</sup>

The LORD lifts the poor from the dust and exalts the needy from the ashes. He enthrones them with princes, the princes of his people. He gives children to the woman who has none and makes her a happy mother.<sup>7</sup>

Though the LORD is supreme, he takes care of the lowly, but he stays away from the proud.<sup>8</sup>

Praise the LORD! He does what is fair for those who have been oppressed. He gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free. The LORD gives sight to the blind. The LORD lifts up people who are in trouble. The LORD loves the righteous. The LORD protects the foreigners. He supports the orphans and widows, but he frustrates the way of the wicked.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 82:1-4

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 103:6

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 107:9

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 107:41-43

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 109:31

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 112:5-6,9

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 113:7-9

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 138:6



## DEAD CHURCH

The LORD will be King forever.<sup>1</sup>

Whenever you are able, do good to people who need help. If you have what your neighbor asks for, don't say, "Come back later. I will give it to you tomorrow."<sup>2</sup>

Some people give much but get back even more. Others don't give what they should and end up poor. Whoever gives to others will get richer; those who help others will themselves be helped.<sup>3</sup>

The wicked want what other evil people have stolen, but good people want to give what they have to others.<sup>4</sup>

It is a sin to hate your neighbor, but being kind to the needy brings a blessing.<sup>5</sup>

Whoever mistreats the poor insults their Maker, but whoever is kind to the needy honors God.<sup>6</sup>

The LORD will tear down the proud person's house, but he will protect the widow's property.<sup>7</sup>

Whoever mistreats the poor insults their Maker; whoever enjoys someone's trouble will be punished.<sup>8</sup>

Being generous to the poor is like lending to the LORD; he will fully repay you.<sup>9</sup>

Whoever ignores the poor when they cry for help will also cry for help and not be answered.<sup>10</sup>

...righteous people give without holding back.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 146:1,7-10

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 3:27-28

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 11:24-25

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 12:12

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 14:21

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 14:31

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 15:25

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 17:5

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 19:17

<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 21:13

<sup>11</sup> Proverbs 21:26

Generous people will be blessed, because they share their food with the poor.<sup>1</sup>

Whoever gets rich by mistreating the poor, and gives presents to the wealthy, will become poor.<sup>2</sup>

Do not abuse poor people because they are poor, and do not take away the rights of the needy in court. The LORD will accuse their accusers and will squeeze the life out of those who squeeze them.<sup>3</sup>

Don't move an old stone that marks a border, and don't take fields that belong to orphans. God, their defender, is strong; he will take their side against you.<sup>4</sup>

Rescue those who are being led to their death; rescue those who are about to be killed. If you say, "We don't know anything about this," God, who knows what's in your mind, will notice. He is watching you, and he will know. He will reward each person for what he has done.<sup>5</sup>

People who brag about gifts they never give are like clouds and wind that give no rain.<sup>6</sup>

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink.<sup>7</sup>

Some people get rich by overcharging others, but their wealth will be given to those who are kind to the poor.<sup>8</sup>

Whoever gives to the poor will have everything he needs, but the one who ignores the poor will receive many curses.<sup>9</sup>

Righteous people care about justice for the poor, but the wicked are

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 22:9

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 22:16

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 22:22-23

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 23:10-11

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 24:11-12

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 25:14 (Cross-reference: Jude 12)

<sup>7</sup> Proverbs 25:21

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 28:8

<sup>9</sup> Proverbs 28:27

not concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; defend the rights of all those who have nothing. Speak up and judge fairly, and defend the rights of the poor and needy.<sup>2</sup>

Who can find a good wife? Because she is worth more than rubies... She welcomes the poor and helps the needy.<sup>3</sup>

When you raise your arms to me in prayer, I will refuse to look at you. Even if you say many prayers, I will not listen to you, because your hands are covered with blood. Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Stop doing the evil things I see you do. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice. Encourage the oppressed. Defend the orphans. Stand up for the rights of widows.<sup>4</sup>

The city of Jerusalem once followed the LORD, but she is no longer loyal to him. They don't seek justice for the orphans or listen to the widows' needs.<sup>5</sup>

The LORD takes his place in court and stands to judge the people. The LORD presents his case against the elders and other leaders of his people: "You have burned the vineyard. Your houses are full of what you took from the poor. What gives you the right to crush my people and grind the faces of the poor into the dirt?" The Lord GOD of Heaven's Armies says this.<sup>6</sup>

The vineyard belonging to the LORD of Heaven's Armies is the house of Israel; and the people of Judah are the garden that he loves. He looked for justice, but there was only injustice. He hoped for righteousness, but there were only cries of distress. Woe to you who add more houses to your houses and more fields to your fields until there is no room left for other people.<sup>7</sup>

Woe to those who make unjust laws, and those who write laws that make life hard for people. They are not fair to the poor, and they rob my

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<sup>1</sup> Proverbs 29:7

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 31:8-9

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 31:10,20

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 1:15-17

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 1:21,23

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 3:13-15

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 5:7-8

people of their rights. They allow people to steal from widows and to take from orphans what really belongs to them.<sup>1</sup>

A new branch will grow from the stump of Jesse; a branch will come from his roots. The Spirit of the LORD will rest upon him. The Spirit will give him wisdom and understanding, guidance and power. The Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD... He will judge the poor honestly; he will be fair in his decisions for the poor people of the land”<sup>2</sup>

LORD, you are my God. You protect the poor; you protect the needy when they are in danger. You are like a shelter from storms, like shade that protects them from the heat.<sup>3</sup>

A fool does not feed the hungry or let thirsty people drink water.<sup>4</sup>

The poor and needy people look for water, but they can't find any. Their tongues are dry with thirst. But I, the LORD, will answer their prayers; I, the God of Israel, will not leave them to die.<sup>5</sup>

The LORD says, “Shout out loud. Don't hold back. Shout out loud like a trumpet. Tell my people what they have done against their God; tell the family of Jacob about their sins. They seek me every day and delight to learn my ways. They act just like a nation that does righteousness, that obeys the commands of its God. They ask me to judge them fairly. They want to draw near to God. They say, ‘Why have we fasted, but you didn't see? Why have we afflicted ourselves, but you didn't notice?’”

But the LORD says, “You do what pleases yourselves on these fast days, and you are unfair to your workers. Even when you fast, you argue and fight and hit each other with your fists. You cannot do these things as you do now and believe your prayers are heard in heaven. Is this the fast that I want? Do I want a day when people afflict themselves? I don't want people just to bow their heads like a plant, stretching out on sackcloth and ashes. Is this what you call a fast? Do you really think this pleases the LORD?

“I will tell you the kind of fast I want: Free the people you have put in prison unfairly and undo their chains. Free those to whom you are unfair and stop their hard labor. Share your food with the hungry and bring poor,

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 10:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 11:1-2,4

<sup>3</sup> Isaiah 25:1,4

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 32:6

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 41:17

homeless people into your own homes. When you see someone who has no clothes, give him yours, and don't refuse to help your own relatives.

"Then your light will shine like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal. Your righteousness will walk before you, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind. Then you will call out, and the LORD will answer. You will cry out, and he will say, 'Here I am.' If you stop making trouble for others, if you stop speaking wickedness and pointing your finger at others, if you feed those who are hungry and take care of the needs of those who are troubled, then your light will shine in the darkness, and you will be bright like sunshine at noon. The LORD will always lead you. He will satisfy your needs in dry lands and give strength to your bones. You will be like a garden that is well-watered, like a spring that never runs dry."<sup>1</sup>

"They have become powerful and rich. They have grown fat and sleek. There is no end to the evil things they do. They do not judge justly. They won't plead the case of the orphan or help the poor be judged fairly. Shouldn't I punish them for doing these things?" says the LORD. "Shouldn't I get revenge on a nation as it deserves?"<sup>2</sup>

You must change your lives and do what is right. Be fair to each other. You must not oppress strangers, orphans, and widows.<sup>3</sup>

Sing to the LORD! Praise the LORD! He rescues the life of the poor from the hand of the wicked.<sup>4</sup>

This is what the LORD says: "Do justice and righteousness. Protect the one who has been robbed from the hand of his attacker. Don't mistreat or hurt the foreigners, orphans, or widows."<sup>5</sup>

"Does having a lot of cedar make you a great king? Your father was satisfied to have food and drink. He did what was right and fair, so everything went well for him. He helped those who were poor and needy, so everything went well for him. That is what it means to know God," says the LORD.<sup>6</sup>

This was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 58:1-11

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 5:27-29

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 7:5-6

<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 20:13

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 22:3

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 22:15-16

proud and had plenty of food and lived in great comfort, but she did not help the poor and needy.<sup>1</sup>

“Suppose a man is good and does what is just and right. He does not mistreat anyone but returns what was given as a promise for a loan. He does not rob other people. He gives bread to the hungry and clothes to those who have none. He does not lend money for interest or profit. He keeps his hand from doing wrong. He judges fairly between one person and another. He lives by my rules and obeys my laws faithfully. Whoever does these things is righteous and will surely live,” says the Lord GOD.<sup>2</sup>

The people in you hate their fathers and mothers. They mistreat the foreigners in you and wrong the orphans and widows in you.<sup>3</sup>

Since the stump of the tree and its roots were left in the ground, your kingdom will be given back to you when you learn that heaven is sovereign. So, O king, please accept my advice. Stop sinning and be righteous. Stop doing wicked things and be kind to the poor. Then you might continue to be successful.<sup>4</sup>

This is what the LORD says: “For the many crimes of Israel, I will punish them. For silver, they sell people who have done nothing wrong; they sell the poor to buy a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as if they were dirt, and they refuse to be fair to those who are suffering... As they worship at their altars, they lie down on clothes taken from the poor.”<sup>5</sup>

You oppress the poor, and crush people who are in need.<sup>6</sup>

You levy a tax on poor people, forcing them to give you grain... You oppress people who do right, you take money to do wrong, and you keep the poor from getting justice in court.<sup>7</sup>

Listen to me, you who trample the needy, you who are trying to do away with the poor people of this country, saying, “When will the New Moon

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 16:49

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 18:5,7-9

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 22:7

<sup>4</sup> Daniel 4:26-27

<sup>5</sup> Amos 2:6-8

<sup>6</sup> Amos 4:1

<sup>7</sup> Amos 5:11-12

festival be over so we can sell grain? When will the Sabbath be over so we can bring out wheat to sell? We can give them less and charge them more, and we can change the scales to cheat the people. We will buy poor people for silver, and needy people for a pair of sandals.”<sup>1</sup>

Woe to those who plan wickedness, who lie on their beds and make evil plans. When the morning light comes, they do what they planned, because they have the power to do so. They want fields, so they take them; they want houses, so they take them away. They oppress people to get their houses; they rob them even of their inheritance.<sup>2</sup>

You say, “What can I bring with me when I come before the LORD, when I bow before God on high? Should I come before him with burnt offerings, with year-old calves? Will the LORD be pleased with a thousand male sheep? Will he be pleased with ten thousand rivers of oil? Should I give my firstborn for the evil I have done? Should I give my very own child for my sin?”

The LORD has told you, O man, what is good; he has told you what he wants from you: to do what is right to other people, love being kind to others, and live humbly, obeying your God.<sup>3</sup>

And the word of the LORD came to Zechariah again, saying, “This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies says: ‘Do what is right and true. Be kind and compassionate to each other. Don’t oppress widows and orphans, foreigners or the poor; don’t even think of doing evil to somebody else.’”<sup>4</sup>

The LORD of Heaven’s Armies says, “Then I will come to you and judge you. I will be quick to testify against those who take part in sorcery, adultery, and perjury, those who cheat workers of their pay and who cheat widows and orphans, those who turn away foreigners, and those who do not fear me.”<sup>5</sup>

Don’t store treasures for yourselves here on earth where moths and rust will destroy them and thieves can break in and steal them. But store for yourselves treasures in heaven where they cannot be destroyed by moths or rust and where thieves cannot break in and steal them. Your heart will be where

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<sup>1</sup> Amos 8:4-6

<sup>2</sup> Micah 2:1-2

<sup>3</sup> Micah 6:6-8

<sup>4</sup> Zechariah 7:8-10

<sup>5</sup> Malachi 3:5

your treasure is. The eye is the lamp for the body. If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are evil, your whole body will be full of darkness. And if the only light you have is really darkness, then you have the worst darkness. No one can serve two masters. The person will hate one master and love the other, or will be devoted to one master and refuse to follow the other. You cannot serve both God and worldly riches. So I tell you, don't worry about the food or drink you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes.<sup>1</sup>

So in everything, do to others what you want them to do to you. This sums up the meaning of the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets.<sup>2</sup>

John the Baptist was in prison, but he heard about what Christ was doing. So John sent some of his disciples to Jesus. They asked him, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we wait for someone else?" Jesus answered them, "Go tell John what you hear and see: The blind can see, the crippled can walk, and lepers are healed. The deaf can hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor. Those who are not offended because of me are blessed."<sup>3</sup>

"If you want to be perfect, then go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me." But when the young man heard this, he left sorrowfully, because he had many possessions. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."<sup>4</sup>

The Son of Man will come again in his great glory, with all his angels. He will be King and sit on his glorious throne. All the nations of the world will be gathered before him, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. The Son of Man will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to the people on his right, "Come, my Father has given you his blessing. Inherit the kingdom God has prepared for you from the creation of the world. Because I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you invited

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 6:19-25

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 7:12

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 11:2-6

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 19:21-24



me into your house. I was naked, and you gave me something to wear. I was sick, and you cared for me. I was in prison, and you visited me.”

Then the righteous people will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and give you food, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you into our house? When did we see you naked and give you something to wear? When did we see you sick or in prison and come to you?”

Then the King will answer, “I tell you the truth, anything you did for even the least of my brothers and sisters, you also did for me.”

Then the King will say to those on his left, “Go away from me. You are cursed. Go into the fire that burns forever that was prepared for the devil and his angels. Because I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not invite me into your house. I was naked, and you gave me nothing to wear. I was sick and in prison, and you did not care for me.”

Then those people will answer, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison? When did we see these things and not help you?”

Then the King will answer, “I tell you the truth, to the extent you refused to do for even the least of my people here, you refused to do for me.” These people will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.<sup>1</sup>

Jesus took the five loaves and two fish and, looking up to heaven, he blessed the food. He broke the bread and gave it to his disciples for them to give to the people. Then he divided the two fish among them all. All the people ate and were satisfied. They filled twelve baskets with the leftover pieces of bread and fish. There were five thousand men who ate.<sup>2</sup>

To the crowds of people who came to be baptized by John, he said, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee away from God’s coming wrath? Do the things that prove your repentance. Don’t begin to say to yourselves, ‘Abraham is our father.’ For I tell you that God could raise up children for Abraham from these rocks. The ax is now ready to cut down the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.” The people asked John, “Then what should we do?” John answered, “If you have two shirts, share with the person who does not

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 25:31-46

<sup>2</sup> Mark 6:41-44

have one. If you have food, share that also.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus traveled to Nazareth, where he had grown up. On the Sabbath day he went to the synagogue, as he always did, and stood up to read. The book of Isaiah the prophet was given to him. He opened the book and found the place where this is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he anointed me to proclaim the Good News to the poor. He has sent me to tell the captives they are free and to tell the blind that they can see again. God sent me to free the oppressed and to proclaim the year when the Lord will show his favor.”

Jesus closed the book, gave it back to the synagogue assistant, and sat down. All the eyes in the synagogue were watching Jesus closely. He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your ears!”<sup>2</sup>

Blessed are you who are poor, because the kingdom of God belongs to you... But woe to you who are rich, because you have had your easy life. Woe to you who are well-fed now, because you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, because you will mourn and weep.<sup>3</sup>

Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who are cruel to you. If anyone hits you on one cheek, offer him the other cheek, too. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt. Give to everyone who asks you, and when someone takes something that is yours, don't demand it back. Do to others what you would want them to do to you.<sup>4</sup>

Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without hoping to get anything back. Then you will have a great reward, and you will be children of the Most High God, because he is kind even to people who are ungrateful and full of sin. Show mercy, just as your Father shows mercy.<sup>5</sup>

Give, and it will be given to you. You will be given much. Pressed down, shaken together, and running over, it will spill into your lap. The standard you use with others is the standard God will use with you.<sup>6</sup>

As a man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, some robbers

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 3:7-11

<sup>2</sup> Luke 4:16-21

<sup>3</sup> Luke 6:20,24-25

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:27-31

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:35-36

<sup>6</sup> Luke 6:38

attacked him. They tore off his clothes, beat him, and left him lying there, almost dead. By chance a priest was going down that road. When he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite came there, and after he went over and looked at the man, he passed by on the other side of the road. Then a Samaritan traveling down the road came to where the hurt man was. When he saw the man, he felt compassion for him. The Samaritan went to him, poured olive oil and wine on his wounds, and bandaged them. Then he put the hurt man on his own donkey and took him to an inn where he cared for him. The next day, the Samaritan brought out two coins, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of this man. If you spend more money on him, I will pay it back to you when I come again."

Then Jesus said, "Which one of these three men do you think was a neighbor to the man who was attacked by the robbers?"

The expert on the law answered, "The one who showed him mercy."

Jesus said to him, "Then go and do what he did."<sup>1</sup>

So give from your hearts to the poor, and then everything will be fully clean. Woe to you Pharisees! You pay tithe on even your mint, your rue, and every other herb in your garden. But you fail to be fair to others and to love God. These are the things you should do without neglecting to do those other things.<sup>2</sup>

"Be careful and guard against all kinds of greed. Life is not measured by how much one owns." Then Jesus told this parable: "There was a rich man who had some land, which grew a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What will I do? I have no place to keep all my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and other goods. Then I can say to myself, 'I have enough good things stored to last for many years. Rest, eat, drink, and enjoy life!'" But God said to him, 'Foolish man! Tonight your life will be taken from you. So who will get those things you have prepared for yourself?' This is how it will be for those who store up things for themselves and are not rich in what matters to God."

Jesus said to his disciples, "So I tell you, don't worry about the food you need to live, or about the clothes you need for your body. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothes... Don't always think about what you will eat or what you will drink, and don't keep worrying. All the Gentiles in the world are trying to get these things, and your Father knows you need

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:30-37

<sup>2</sup> Luke 11:41-42

them. But seek God’s kingdom, and all your other needs will be met as well. Don’t fear, little flock, because your Father wants to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Make for yourselves moneybags that will not wear out, the treasure in heaven that never runs out, where thieves can’t steal and moths can’t destroy. Your heart will be where your treasure is.”<sup>1</sup>

Who is the faithful and wise servant that the master trusts to give the other servants their food at the right time? That servant will be blessed when the master comes and finds him doing his work. I tell you the truth, the master will put him in charge of everything he owns.<sup>2</sup>

When you give a lunch or a dinner, don’t invite only your friends, your family, your other relatives, and your rich neighbors. At another time they will invite you to eat with them, and you will be repaid. Instead, when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then you will be blessed, because they have nothing and cannot pay you back. But you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.<sup>3</sup>

There was a rich man who always dressed in the finest clothes and lived in luxury every day. And a very poor man named Lazarus, whose body was covered with sores, was laid at the rich man’s gate. He longed to eat only the small pieces of food that fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. Later, Lazarus died, and the angels carried him to the arms of Abraham. The rich man died, too, and was buried. In Hades, he was in torment. Lifting up his eyes, the rich man saw Abraham far away with Lazarus at his side. He called, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire!” But Abraham said, “Child, remember when you were alive you had the good things in life, but bad things happened to Lazarus. Now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, there is a great chasm set in place between you and us, so no one can cross over to you, and no one can leave there and come to us.”

The rich man said, “Father, then I beg you to send Lazarus to my father’s house. I have five brothers, and Lazarus could warn them so that they will not come to this place of torment.” But Abraham said, “They have the law of Moses and the writings of the prophets; let them learn from them.” The rich man said, “No, father Abraham! But if someone goes to them from the

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 12:15-34

<sup>2</sup> Luke 12:42-44

<sup>3</sup> Luke 14:12-14

dead, they would believe and change their hearts and lives.” But Abraham said to him, “If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded by someone who comes back from the dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was going through the city of Jericho. A man was there named Zacchaeus, who was a very important tax collector, and he was wealthy. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was not able because he was too short to see above the crowd. He ran ahead to a place where Jesus was about to pass, and he climbed a sycamore tree so he could see him. When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down! Because I must stay at your house today.”

Zacchaeus came down quickly and welcomed him joyfully. All the people saw this and began to complain, “Jesus is staying with a sinner!” But Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “I will give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times more.” Jesus said to him, “Salvation has come to this house today, because this man also is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to find lost people and save them.”<sup>2</sup>

All the believers were in close fellowship and had all things in common. They would sell their land and the things they owned and then divide the money and give it to anyone who needed it. The believers met together in the Temple every day. They ate together in their homes, sharing their food with joyful and generous hearts.<sup>3</sup>

The group of believers were one heart and mind. All those in the group acted as though their private property belonged to everyone in the group. In fact, they shared everything... There were no needy people among them. Because from time to time those who owned fields or houses sold them, brought the money from the sale, and laid it at the feet of the apostles. Then the money was distributed to anyone who needed it.<sup>4</sup>

Cornelius was a godly man. He and all the other people who lived in his house feared God. He gave much of his money to the poor and prayed to God often. One afternoon about three o’clock, Cornelius clearly saw a vision. An angel of God came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

Cornelius stared at the angel. He was terrified and said, “What do you want, Lord?”

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 16:19-31

<sup>2</sup> Luke 19:1-10

<sup>3</sup> Acts 2:44-46

<sup>4</sup> Acts 4:32-35

The angel said, “God has heard your prayers. He has seen that you give to the poor, and he remembers you...”

Peter began to speak: “I truly understand now that to God every person is the same. In every nation God accepts anyone who fears him and practices righteousness.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was with you, I never wanted anyone’s money or fine clothes. You yourselves know I always worked with my own hands to take care of my own needs and the needs of those who were with me. I provided an example to you in everything I did that you should work as I did and help the weak. I taught you to remember the words Jesus said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”<sup>2</sup>

We who are strong should help the weak with their weaknesses, and not please only ourselves. Let each of us please our neighbors for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not live to please himself.<sup>3</sup>

Brothers and sisters, look at what you were when God called you. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many of you had great influence. Not many of you were of high social status. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and he chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose what the world thinks is lowly and what the world looks down on and thinks is nothing in order to destroy what the world thinks is important.<sup>4</sup>

When you meet as a congregation, you are not really eating the Lord’s Supper. This is because when you eat, each person eats without waiting for the others. Some people do not get enough to eat, while others get drunk. Don’t you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you have no regard for God’s church and so humiliate those who are poor? What should I tell you? Should I praise you? I will not praise you for doing this. ...All who eat the bread and drink the cup without careful regard for the body eat and drink judgment against themselves. That is why many in your group are sick and weak, and a number of you have died... So my brothers and sisters, when you gather as a congregation to eat, wait for each other. Anyone who is too hungry should eat at home so that in meeting together you will not bring God’s judgment on

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 10:2-4,34-35

<sup>2</sup> Acts 20:33-35

<sup>3</sup> Romans 15:1-3

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26-28

yourselves.<sup>1</sup>

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace God gave the churches in Macedonia. Although they have been tested by great trials and are very poor, they gave much because of their great joy. I can tell you that they gave as much as they were able and even more than they could afford. No one told them to do it. But they begged and pleaded with us to let them share in this service for God's people...

I am not commanding you to give. But I want to see if your love is true by comparing you with others that really want to help. You know the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor so that by his becoming poor you might become rich...

Give from what you have. If you want to give, your gift will be accepted. It will be judged by what you have, not by what you do not have. We do not want you to have trials while other people are at ease, but we want everything to be equal. At this time you have plenty and what you have can help others who are in need. Then later, when they have plenty, they can help you when you are in need, and all will be equal. As it is written in the Scriptures, "The person who gathered more did not have too much, nor did the person who gathered less have too little."<sup>2</sup>

Those leaders who seemed to be important did not change the Good News that I preach... The only thing they asked us was to remember to help the poor – something I really wanted to do.<sup>3</sup>

When we have the opportunity to help anyone, we should do it. But we should give special attention to those who are in the family of faith.<sup>4</sup>

Those who are stealing must stop stealing and start working. They should do something useful with their hands. Then they will have something to share with those who are poor.<sup>5</sup>

When you do things, do not let selfishness or pride be your guide. Instead, be humble and give more regard to others than to yourselves. Do not look out for your own interests, but look out for others' interests. In your lives you must have the same attitude as Christ Jesus. Christ himself was like God

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:20-34

<sup>2</sup> 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 2:6,10

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:10

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:28

in everything. But he did not think that being equal with God was something to be used for his own benefit. But he gave up his place with God and made himself nothing. He became like a slave and was born as a man. And when he was living as a man, he humbled himself and was fully obedient to God, even to the point of death – death on a cross.<sup>1</sup>

Provide support for widows who are truly widows... But the widow who lives in luxury is really dead while she is alive... To be on the list of widows, a woman must be at least sixty years old. She must have been faithful to her husband. She must be known for her good works – works such as raising her children, welcoming strangers, washing the feet of God’s people, helping those in distress, and giving her life to do all kinds of good deeds.<sup>2</sup>

Command those who are rich with the things of this world not to be proud. Tell them to hope in God, not in their uncertain riches. God richly gives us everything to enjoy. Tell them to do good, to be rich in doing good deeds, to be generous and ready to share. By doing that, they will be storing up a treasure for themselves as a strong foundation for the future. Then they will be able to take hold of the life that is true life.<sup>3</sup>

Our people must learn to use their lives for doing good deeds to meet urgent needs so that their lives will not be unfruitful.<sup>4</sup>

Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not neglect to welcome strangers, because some who have done this have welcomed angels without knowing it. Remember those who are in prison as if you were in prison with them. Remember those who are mistreated as if you were suffering with them.<sup>5</sup>

Do not neglect to do good to others, and share with them, because such sacrifices please God.<sup>6</sup>

People who think they are religious but say things they should not say are just deceiving themselves. Their “religion” is worth nothing. Religion that God the Father accepts as pure and without fault is this: caring for orphans

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<sup>1</sup> Philippians 2:3-8

<sup>2</sup> 1 Timothy 5:3,6,9-10

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6:17-19

<sup>4</sup> Titus 3:14

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13:1-3

<sup>6</sup> Hebrews 13:16



## DEAD CHURCH

and widows in their distress, and keeping yourself free from the world's evil influence.<sup>1</sup>

My dear brothers and sisters, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, never show favoritism. Suppose someone comes into your church meeting wearing nice clothes and a gold ring. At the same time a poor person comes in wearing old, dirty clothes. You show special attention to the one wearing nice clothes and say, "Please, sit here in this good seat." But you say to the poor person, "Stand over there," or, "Sit on the floor by my feet."

What are you doing? You are making some people more important than others, and with evil thoughts you are deciding that one person is better. Listen, my dear brothers and sisters! God chose the poor in the world to be rich with faith and to be heirs of the kingdom God promised to those who love him. But you show no respect to the poor.<sup>2</sup>

In everything you say and do, remember that you will be judged by the law of freedom. So you must show mercy to others, or God will not show mercy to you when he judges you. But the person who shows mercy can stand without fear at the judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Suppose a brother or sister in Christ is naked and lacks daily food. If you say to that person, "God be with you! I hope you stay warm and get plenty to eat," but you do not provide for the needs of their body, your words are worth nothing.<sup>4</sup>

You rich people, listen! Cry and be very sad because of the miseries that are coming to you. Your riches have rotted, and your clothes have been eaten by moths. Your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be an evidence against you. It will eat your bodies like fire. You stored up your treasure in the last days. The pay you did not give the workers who mowed your fields cries out against you, and the cries of the workers have been heard by the Lord of Armies. Your life on earth was full of luxury and pleasing yourselves with everything you wanted. You made yourselves fat, like an animal ready to be killed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:26-27

<sup>2</sup> James 2:1-6

<sup>3</sup> James 2:12-13

<sup>4</sup> James 2:15-16

<sup>5</sup> James 5:1-5

Open your homes to each other, without complaining.<sup>1</sup>

This is how we know what real love is: Jesus laid down his life for us. So we should lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. Suppose someone has the world's possessions and sees a brother or sister in need, but does not help. Then God's love is not living in that person. My children, we should love people not only with words and talk, but by showing true love through our actions.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 4:9

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:16-18





## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hey, we're Josh and Tess, the husband and wife team behind Acts Initiative. Unfortunately, most of what we call "Christianity" today... isn't.

The early Christians didn't live how Christians live today. They didn't care about money, they hated the world, they shared generously with everyone, they didn't look out for their own interests, and they invested in eternity instead of in education, possessions, and other temporary things. But today, we can't even imagine a life like that... and that's a problem.

We want to see REAL Christianity spreading across the world again - the kind we read about in the New Testament. So, we started the Acts Initiative website and YouTube channel as a way to publish free books and videos where we expose many lies that Christians have become accustomed to and accepted because of our culture, churches, and the various doctrines we've been taught. We want to help people recognize the problem and start BECOMING the solution by changing the way we think and the way we live as Christians.

Our personal story is that we both grew up in Church and thought we loved Jesus, but we didn't do what he said. (See John 14:23). We thought we were doing okay because all the "Christians" around us lived like us. But eventually, we started realizing that our priorities weren't the same priorities we saw all over the Bible. We were trying to fit the Bible into our normal lives instead of changing our lives to look like how Jesus said he wants his followers to live.

And what Jesus wants is radical. So, either Jesus didn't really mean what he said, or we needed to change.

We knew it was insane that we were too busy working and paying bills to do things for the Lord. We needed to free up our time and resources. So, we got rid of a bunch of stuff we didn't need, stopped eating out, canceled our entertainment subscriptions, etc... until we had simplified as much as we could imagine at the time. (This is an ongoing process, and we're realizing new ways we can simplify all the time!) Currently we travel full time in a school bus tiny house where we write books, make videos, write music, pick up side jobs if we need to, and look for opportunities to help people in need.

Be blessed as you do the things Jesus actually cares about!





