



Missionary Families of Christ – USA
DEFENDING FAITH, FAMILY AND LIFE

24/7 for JESUS

To those who strive to live totally for Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

You are a Christian. You need to live the way of Christ. This means a life of holiness and discipleship.

Holiness is a great challenge, as it means being like God Himself. You need to be holy as God is holy. You need to “not act in compliance with the desires of your former ignorance” (1 Pt 1:14). You are set apart, apart from worldliness and selfishness. You are to imitate Christ, and thus, “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, ‘Be holy because I am holy.’” (1 Pt 1:15-16). Such holiness is all-encompassing. It is with regard to every aspect of your conduct.

Discipleship is a great challenge, as it means walking in the very footsteps of our Master, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus himself defined the conditions of discipleship, as he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Lk 9:23). To deny self is counterintuitive, as we naturally look to our own well-being and self-fulfillment. To take up the cross is undesirable, as we look to comfort, convenience and avoidance of pain. To follow Jesus is challenging, as his call to total fidelity oftentimes conflicts with our proclivity for worldly pleasures. Discipleship is very much a daily struggle.

The most important part of our life is our life of faith. As a Christian, we must have Jesus at the center of our lives. This is not an optional extra. It is not just a part of our lives. It is everything that we are and do. We are a Christian all the time.

Now that is not easy. And due to our fallen nature, the allure of the world, and the assaults of the devil, we will falter and fail. But by the grace of God and the power of the Spirit, we must get up and strive to continue to move forward. In fact, we learn from our failures.¹ In fact, we learn to be totally dependent on God.

But we must do our part. Aside from His grace, God gives us practical ways to grow in holiness and discipleship. In fact, there are some things God wants us to do that are so fundamental, so important, that we must be engaged in them *all the time. Always.*

In our relationship with God, with others and with the world, we must be 24/7 for Jesus.

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¹ In the Lord there are no failures but simply occasions for learning and growth.

I RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Our most basic relationship is with God. God is our Father and we are His children. Jesus is our Lord and Master. The Spirit is with us to guide us and empower us in the Christian life. God is our all. Apart from God we are nothing.

As we cannot be on our own, we must cling to God and strive to continually work on our life in Christ. God does give us the tools. There are certain postures and disciplines that we will need to *always* try to live out.

1 FEAR THE LORD

*“learn always to fear the Lord, your God.”
(Deuteronomy 14:23b)*

God is God and we are mere human flesh. God is Creator while we are His creatures. God is perfect while we are tragically flawed. God is all-powerful while we are weak. Moses, that great man of God, said this about Him. “Look, the heavens, even the highest heavens, belong to the Lord, your God, as well as the earth and everything in it.” (Dt 10:14).

What then should our proper posture be toward God? It should be as Moses told Israel. “Now, therefore, Israel, what does the Lord, your God, ask of you but to fear the Lord, your God” (Dt 10:12a)?

But human beings no longer appreciate the awesome majesty of God. This is unlike Bildad the Shuhite who said, “Dominion and dread are his who brings about harmony in his heavens. Is there any numbering of his troops?” (Jb 25:2-3a). God is no longer fully appreciated as the wondrous Creator and the great King of kings. And human beings at times think they have no need for God. Many act as if they control their own destinies. Many rely on their own strength. Many trust in their own wisdom. To act as such is a tragic mistake, that has serious negative consequences.

If however we fear the Lord, then the fullness of our proper posture toward God will become clear: “to follow in all his ways, to love and serve the Lord, your God, with your whole heart and with your whole being, to keep the commandments and statutes of the Lord that I am commanding you today for your own well-being” (Dt 10:12b-13).

We fear God, then everything else falls into place.

The meaning of fear of the Lord

What is fear of God? Certainly part of it is being afraid of an all-powerful God who exercises divine judgment over us. “Be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.” (Mt 10:28b). “For our God is a consuming fire.” (Heb 12:29). But we also know God is merciful. Though He is a God of justice, He is also a God of love. “If you, Lord, keep account of sins, Lord, who can stand? But with you is forgiveness and so you are revered.” (Ps 130:3-4). Thus, because God is love, then “there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear because fear has to do with punishment” (1 Jn 4:18a).

And so fear of the Lord is something more profound. It is not negative but positive. It is about awe. It is awe of an awesome God, the great Creator of the whole universe. “Should you not fear me—oracle of the Lord—should you not tremble before me? I made the sandy shore the sea’s limit, which by eternal decree it may not overstep. Toss though it may, it is to no avail; though its billows roar, they cannot overstep.” (Jer 5:22).

Rather than being afraid (or in spite of being afraid), awe is about great respect, whole-hearted submission, deep reverence, sublime honor and humble adoration. It is the proper posture of a creature before its Creator, of a subject before his King, of a servant before his Master.

Before an awesome God

We must understand the fallen human condition. We are sinners. We are in universal bondage to sin. Only God can save us. God already took the initiative to save us, when He sent His very own Son to suffer and die for us. But we need to take hold of that salvation. It happens as we stand in awe of what God has done. How can it be? That God would stoop to becoming man, and be treated with contempt, and suffer death in ignominy? How awesome is that!

And then God calls us to be like Him, to be holy as He is holy, to be perfect as He is perfect. We are to be another Christ. How awesome is that!

We stand in awe of God. This should lead us to fullness of life in Him. Otherwise, the opposite happens. We wallow in the mire of sin. “There is no one just, not one, there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God. All have gone astray; all alike are worthless; there is not one who does good, there is not even one. Their throats are open graves; they deceive with their tongues; the venom of asps is on their lips; their mouths are full of bitter cursing. Their feet are quick to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their ways, and the way of peace they know not. There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Rom 3:10-18).

If we do not understand, then we remain lost. If we do not seek God, then we go astray. If we do not accept the worth we are offered, then we remain worthless. If we do not allow God to make us whole, then we face only ruin and misery.

Importance for our lives

This is why the sacred word of God tells us that “the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord.” (Prv 9:10a).² If we understand and live out the fear of God, then we become wise, and we begin to act in accord with God’s ways. Then we receive what God has already prepared for those who fear Him.

- * We receive God’s protection. “The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he saves them.” (Ps 34:8).³
- * We receive God’s provision. “Fear the Lord, you his holy ones; nothing is lacking to those who fear him.” (Ps 34:10).
- * We receive God’s mercy. “His mercy is from age to age to those who fear him.” (Lk 1:50).
- * We receive God’s blessings. “Blessed the man who fears the Lord” (Ps 112:1a).
- * We receive God’s salvation. “Near indeed is his salvation to those who fear him” (Ps 85:10a).

Fear of the Lord is a gift of the Holy Spirit, freely given to us.⁴ Together with other gifts, the intent is for personal sanctification, so we can be like Christ. The prophet Isaiah, in alluding to Jesus as the ideal Davidic king, speaks of these gifts. “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: a spirit of wisdom and of understanding, a spirit of counsel and of strength, a spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord,⁵ and his delight shall be the fear of the Lord.” (Is 11:2-3a).

Fear of the Lord brings wisdom, understanding, counsel and knowledge, as well as strength and piety in personal life. Indeed, fear of the Lord is a delight.

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² Other passages say the same thing. “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prv 1:7a). “The fear of the Lord is training for wisdom” (Prv 15:33a). “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Ps 111:10a).

³ This is especially important as we do the work of evangelization, which engages us in spiritual war.

⁴ Received in the Sacrament of Baptism.

⁵ The Septuagint and the Vulgate read “piety” for “fear of the Lord” in the first occurrence, thus listing gifts.

2 PRAY

*“Pray without ceasing.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:17)*

How are we to pray without ceasing? Are we then able to do other things such as eat, sleep and work? Does this mean we are praying every single moment of our lives? The answer is YES!

But praying is not just that time when we are in our prayer nook focusing on our interaction with God. Prayer is actually about having a relationship with God. And that relationship needs to be 24/7. There must not be any moment in our lives when we are not in a vibrant and living relationship with God.

Prayer is a posture of the heart. It is having a devotional spirit. It is an attitude of awareness of God. It is being in God’s presence. It is a posture of surrender to God. Every waking moment is offered to God. And even as we sleep, we offer ourselves before we sleep, and we thank God after we awake.

Persistence in prayer

As prayer is 24/7, it is necessary for us “to pray always without becoming weary.” (Lk 18:1b). Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow who badgered the dishonest judge who was forced to render a favorable decision to her. In like manner, how much more will the just Judge be favorable to us who persist in prayer? “Will not God then secure the rights of his chosen ones who call out to him day and night?” (Lk 18:7a).

What is our right as God’s chosen ones, according to our destiny in Christ? It is to be in the embrace of the Father, now and then eternally in heaven. This is what God wants to happen. But it is up to us whether we want the same thing. By persistence in prayer, we are signifying our desire to be as God wants us to be. By persistence in prayer, we allow God to keep us on the right track.

Further, God is a just Judge. Justice is giving to the other person what is his due. To God is due worship. To our fellow human beings is due respect. To the poor is due an equitable share of the world’s goods. Now to God’s children, by God’s own desire and decision, is due eternal life. If we pray without becoming weary, we are saying we want what God wants. Jesus then says, “I tell you, he will see to it that justice is done for them speedily.” (Lk 18:8a).

At the end of this parable, Jesus says something enigmatic. “But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Lk 18:8b). Now where did that come from? What does this have to do with the parable of the persistent widow? Well, persistent prayer will get us to heaven. Without persistent prayer though, many are not going to make it. Prayer fuels and intensifies faith, which is what saves us.

Now persistence translates to endurance and perseverance. We never cease praying. We approach the throne room of God and expect to be listened to and receive what we ask for. "Ask and it will be given to you; For everyone who asks, receives; how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him." (Mt 7:7-11). God delights in acting lovingly and favorably towards His children.

There will be times though when we will not receive the answer we want to our prayer. This is because we might ask for things that will not be good for us. "You ask but do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on our passions." (Jas 4:3). We often want the things the world has to offer: money, power, prominence, self-indulgence. But God knows that these most often will bring us further away from Him. "Do you not know that to be a lover of the world means enmity with God?" (Jas 4:4b). So God will not grant what we ask, for our own good.

At other times, what we ask for might not be granted right away. The timing is always up to God. Further, our having to continually ask can make us more prayerful, more aware of our total dependence on God, more appreciative when it is finally granted.

Provided for and protected

In what other ways is prayer of critical importance?

Since prayer connects us intimately with God, then we know we are in His gracious hands. Thus we need never be anxious about the challenges of life. "Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God." (Phil 4:6). We need not worry. We need never be afraid.

Prayer is the key to facing any and all challenges in life. We bring our needs to our loving Father, knowing that He will always do what is best for us. As such, even before we are granted our requests, we already thank Him, confident of what He is able and desirous to do. "Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:7). What a great blessing to have minds and hearts at peace, no matter what is happening to us or around us!

Now, in the same way that God wants us with him in heaven, the enemy wants us with him in hell! Like it or not, we are involved in the spiritual war raging in the heavens and on earth over the souls of people. The devil constantly tempts us and attempts to bring us down. We need the strength and power of God to resist.

As such, we are to "put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil." (Eph 6:11). The armor of God consists of truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation and the word of God. There is one more element: prayer. "With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit." (Eph 6:18a). The devil never rests and takes every opportunity to bring us down. As such, we in turn need to take every opportunity to pray. 24/7.

Proper posture in prayer

What is our proper posture in praying?

First is total dependence on God. Everything that we are, what we have, and what we can do, is totally up to God. Our prayer reflects that. On the one hand we are nothing without God. On the other hand, we have full confidence in God's love for us and His granting us all good things.

Second is humility. If we are totally dependent upon God, then we can never have sinful pride in our lives, even as our lives manifest great achievements. We take a cue from the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Both went to the temple area to pray.

The Pharisee was convinced of his own righteousness and despised the tax collector. "But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'" (Lk 18:13). Jesus extolled the latter and not the former.

Third is gratitude. Having a relationship with God, expressed through prayer, is a great privilege. He is God after all, and who are we? But God does give us that privilege. "Enter his gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name" (Ps 100:4). Just sit or kneel there and rest in His presence.

Fourth is listening. Many think of prayer as speaking to God, especially asking God for things. But prayer is a great opportunity to listen to God, to allow God to form us. We do not need to ask Him for things because He already knows our needs, and will act to give us what we need, in the proper time.

But we often do not know what we need to do to live His way of life. So we need to listen and be instructed by God. "In praying, do not babble like the pagans, who think they will be heard because of their many words." (Mt 6:7). Rather, listen, and hear God say, "Be still and know that I am God!" (Ps 46:11a).

Fifth is praying according to God's will. We must want God's will and not our own to be done. Many think about what they want and so ask God for that. While we can do that, we must know that God's ways and thoughts are totally different from ours.⁶ So Jesus himself taught us how to pray, and we are to say, "your will be done, on earth as in heaven." (Mt 6:10b). God is perfect, and it is His plan for our lives that is perfect.

⁶ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways—oracle of the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, my thoughts higher than your thoughts." (Is 55:8-9).

Praying all the time

So praying without ceasing is about a 24/7 relationship with God. But it also involves quick practical prayers that can be made at every occasion, aside from our regular prayer time each day. We can turn everyday moments into prayer.

- * When we wake up, a quick prayer of thanks for the gift of life and offering up our day to God.
- * Prayers before meals in thanksgiving.
- * Before we travel as we drive or ride a vehicle.
- * A quick prayer when we start meetings.⁷
- * Offering whatever chores we do, even the most mundane.
- * Interceding for others as we do chores.
- * Prayers as events unfold during the day.
- * Prayer before giving a talk or a testimony.
- * Prayer before fraternal dialogue.
- * Prayer whenever we are waiting—while in line after ordering our food, at the airport awaiting our flight, stuck in traffic, awaiting the person we are to meet, and so on.
- * Prayer when faced with a challenge or actually in trouble or suffering. “Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray.” (Jas 5:13a).
- * Prayer for wisdom and enlightenment as we read and study the word of God.
- * Examining our conscience before we sleep.
- * Prayer before we go to sleep, thanking God for the day and all the blessings.

These prayers are varied: an intercession, pronouncing a blessing, whenever tempted, in times of trouble, asking for opportunities to share Christ, in sickness and health, in success or failure, in strength or weakness, in victory or in defeat.

If we pray without ceasing, then our every waking moment is covered and secure. When we put ourselves in the presence of God, then certainly He will be there. “I keep the Lord always before me; with him at my right hand, I shall never be shaken.” (Ps 16:8). Jesus becomes our constant companion, being there in every circumstance. No wonder we need never be afraid. “Therefore my heart is glad, my soul rejoices; my body also dwells secure.” (Ps 16:9).

⁷ This can be an open verbal prayer if the group is predisposed to it, or it can be a silent private prayer.

3

READ AND STUDY THE BIBLE

*“Do not let this book of the law
depart from your lips.
Recite it by day and by night”
(Joshua 1:8a)*

We must be people of prayer. But we must also be people of the book. The Bible is the very word of God. When we pray, we try to listen to God and discern His will. God helps us by His grace. But still, what we believe God tells us or wants for our lives can become very subject to our own desires and priorities. We can only hear God in our hearts.⁸ But with the Bible it is different. We can actually read the very words of God.⁹ While there can be different interpretations about what we read, still it is right there, in black and white.

The Bible is an amazing book. It is one book made up of 73 books,¹⁰ written by at least 40 authors, done over 1,600 years, in 13 countries, in 3 different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek), and by different people of vastly different backgrounds. It is about the story of salvation, from the creation of the world up to the end of the world. It contains not only the words of the patriarchs, the prophets, the evangelists and the apostles, but the very words of the Son of God, Jesus himself.

As such, it is most important in knowing God’s will and living according to His ways. As St Jerome says, “Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.” But so many Catholics today do not know the Bible.¹¹ How then can they be Christian?

Critical importance of the Bible

In what ways is the Bible so important for our Christian lives?

First, there is no other written instruction more valuable than “the sacred scriptures, which are capable of giving you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2 Tm 3:15). Jesus came to save us. We can only enter heaven and be with our Father eternally if we are saved, if we put our faith in Jesus. The Bible gives us wisdom in this.

Second, fullness of faith does not just happen. We need instruction, correction, formation, training. The Bible is our instruction book. “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for refutation, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that one who belongs to God may be competent, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tm 3:16-17).

⁸ Oftentimes we hear only what we want to hear.

⁹ As written by human beings under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ 46 books of the Old Testament and 27 books of the New Testament.

¹¹ Unlike our Protestant or evangelical brethren, or for that matter, even sects and cults. Of course how they interpret or use the Bible has many errors, but still, at least they read it.

Third, we as creatures and children of God have a soul. We partake of the divine nature. But oftentimes, our sinful fallen flesh stands in the way of our knowing and living out our calling and destiny. It is the Bible that cuts right through and penetrates our inmost being. It is able to challenge and confront our human thoughts and ways. "Indeed, the word of God is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating even between soul and spirit, joints and marrow, and able to discern reflections and thoughts of the heart." (Heb 4:12).

Fourth, the Bible is our reliable guide in our daily walk. It is so easy to stray away or to veer away from our calling. Many worldly voices call out to us, enticing us and confusing us. It is the Bible that can show us the way. "Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path." (Ps 119:105). Today these dissonant voices are even within our Church. Many are embracing the culture of the day. People go with the shifting sands throughout the ages. But there can only be one, unchanging and authentic gospel. As Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever,¹² so too his word. "The grass withers, the flower wilts, but the word of our God stands forever." (Is 40:8).

Fifth, we are called not only to love God but to love our neighbor. We with others make up the body of Christ. We are to work together and accomplish the mission of the Church together. But there are many who are ignorant of the call, or who are misled, or who are insistent on going the wrong way. Those of us who know the way are to instruct them, and if need be, correct, admonish and rebuke them. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as in all wisdom you teach and admonish one another" (Col 3:16a).

So we must read, meditate on, study, and most importantly, live the word. We do not just read the Bible, we live it. "Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deluding yourselves." (Jas 1:22). It is the Bible that should guide our every thought, word and deed. If we do so, then we stand on a solid foundation, and the ravages of an evil world cannot bring us down. "Everyone who listens to these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock." (Mt 7:24). We follow Jesus, and it is Jesus himself who teaches and guides us, through his word in the Bible.

¹² Hebrews 13:8.

4

HAVE A CLEAR CONSCIENCE

*“I always strive to keep my conscience
clear before God and man.”
(Acts 24:16)*

Conscience is that inner voice within us, put there by our Creator, to help us discern good and evil. It is an inborn sense of right and wrong. It is the law of God written in our hearts. It is built in to tell us when something is wrong, and it brings guilt when we do wrong. Paul says that “the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them” (Rom 2:15). Conscience is our inner voice and guide.

So we should always strive to have a clear conscience. When we say or do something and our conscience causes us discomfort, we must strive to look deeply into the situation, and try to discern if we are doing right or not. To have a clear conscience is to know in our heart and mind that we are doing no wrong.

The limits of conscience

In today’s world however, discernment and conscience are much abused. It is used by many to justify the wrong that they do. They simply say, “My conscience is clear.” That to them becomes license to do what they do. But discernment is not perfect and conscience is not infallible. In fact, in today’s world, these often lead people astray. Many hearts have become hardened and cold, and this prevents people from realizing what is right and true.

This mistaken approach to conscience is all about humanism, putting the man rather than God at the center. It looks to what man *thinks* is best for him rather than what God *knows* is best for him. It reduces the gospel to the convenience and pleasure of man rather than looking to an embrace of the cross. It insists that the clear and immutable teaching of Christ and the Church through two millennia are now subject to the zeitgeist. In effect, God exists for man and not man for God.

Thus conscience can actually become evil. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, “let us approach with a sincere heart and in absolute trust, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience” (Heb 10:22a). If one’s thoughts and desires are being formed by the world and not by God, if there is lack of sincerity of heart, then our conscience can lead us to do wrong. Thus Paul says, “Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect.” (Rom 12:2). If conscience is malformed, or worse, evil, then discernment will be in error.

There are those who are far from God, who have embraced the world, and who thus have little sense of sin. They are unbelieving and defiled. “To the clean all things are clean, but to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is clean; in fact, both their minds and their consciences are tainted.” (Ti 1:15).

Today many consciences are malformed and thus unreliable for correct discernment. Thus discernment and conscience cannot just stand by themselves. Conscience must first of all be properly formed. But then, today there are pastors in the Church who no longer give proper formation, or in fact condone things that are wrong.¹³ As such, conscience not only must be properly formed, but must always be in accordance with the Magisterium of the Church. Authentic and traditional discernment must be rooted on solid principles of faith, especially Sacred Scripture, Tradition, the Magisterium of the Church, and the lives of the saints. Discernment cannot just be what you think or believe to be right or true, apart from its faith moorings. Otherwise it is easy to be deceived, especially by the evil one.

Some people think that if their conscience is clear, then they can do no wrong. And some pastors teach them that this is so. But we might believe our conscience is clear, but doing wrong will never excuse us. Paul himself said, “I am not conscious of anything against me, but I do not thereby stand acquitted; the one who judges me is the Lord.” (1 Cor 4:4).

Notice to pastors in the formation of God’s people: “The aim of this instruction is love from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” (1 Tm 1:5). It must always be in connection with the high standards of God. It must be pure and sincere.

Having a well-formed conscience

How can we keep our consciences clear before God and man?

First, we must be undergoing transformation in Christ. We must strive for holiness and Christian perfection. Our love for Jesus must grow deeper, knowing what he has done for us as he gave his life for us on the cross. The blood he shed for us on the cross will continue to wash us clean, and “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.” (Heb 9:14).

Second, we must be rooted in the word of God. The Bible is a firm and solid foundation by which we gauge our actions in relation to the laws of God. “Rather, the law of the Lord is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night.” (Ps 1:2). We must soak in the word of God.

Third, we must know authentic Church teaching. This is the Magisterium of our Church. Its most basic document is the Catechism of the Catholic Church. We must continue to undergo Christian formation. We must read Christian books. We must be eager to learn. No matter how much we already know, we must have the posture of a learner. “Although you should be teachers by this time, you need to have someone teach you again the basic elements of the utterances of God.” (Heb 5:12a). Our knowledge of our faith and of what is right and just should continually be upgraded, so that we would be among “those whose faculties are trained by practice to discern good and evil.” (Heb 5:14b).

¹³ Such as contraception, abortion and same-sex relationships. When priests give Communion to those who are openly pro-abortion and bishops say nothing, then people are led to think this is acceptable. Their consciences then become malformed.

Fourth, we must do a regular examination of conscience.¹⁴ We review our thoughts, words and deeds (or lack of deeds) to see if these have conformed to God's laws and ways. We do an internal self-examination of the condition of our spiritual life. If we find we have done wrong, we must repent quickly and later on confess our sin. We must not allow sin to fester and to take root, or worse, for us to be comfortable in our sin.

Enabled to witness

Finally, as our Church is missionary and we are all called to participate in the work of evangelization, which engages us in spiritual war, we must become holy warriors. When we serve God in this way, we can expect to be assaulted and maligned. But for us to fully engage in the war, our consciences must be clear, so that the enemy cannot accuse us and render us useless. We are to "fight a good fight by having faith and a good conscience. Some, by rejecting conscience, have made a shipwreck of their faith" (1 Tm 1:18b-19). How can one whose foundation of faith is weak proclaim that faith to others effectively?

By having a clear conscience, we are prepared to witness to Christ, whenever the opportunity presents itself. "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence, keeping your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who defame your good conduct in Christ may themselves be put to shame." (1 Pt 3:15b-16).

We must be like Job. When his friends accused him of wrongdoing and were insisting he admit to this, he could say with conviction, "My justice I maintain and I will not relinquish it; my heart does not reproach me for any of my days." (Jb 27:6). His conscience was clear.

We must be like Paul. When facing an antagonistic Sanhedrin, "Paul looked intently at the Sanhedrin and said, 'My brothers, I have conducted myself with a perfectly clear conscience before God to this day.'" (Acts 23:1). He could not be intimidated, he would not back down, because his conscience was clear.

As we face accusation and opposition and persecution, we have the assurance of a clear conscience. "I speak the truth in Christ, I do not lie; my conscience joins with the holy Spirit in bearing me witness" (Rom 9:1).

So we always strive to keep our conscience clear and clean. Then we can face any man, but more importantly we can face God. "I am grateful to God, whom I worship with a clear conscience as my ancestors did" (2 Tm 1:3a).

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¹⁴ It would actually be good to do this each and every day, before we go off to sleep.

II RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS

Next to God, we have a basic relationship with other people, especially with fellow Christians. We are established by God as His Church. We are to love and serve one another. We are to be united in mind and purpose. We are to help each other get to heaven.

Unfortunately, the history of the Church and of God's people has been one of strife and division. It is ironic that such strife and division happen as God's people strive to serve Him. We cannot take our fraternal relationships for granted. We need to work at them. Fortunately, God gives us certain virtues by which the body can be assured of unity and peace. As this is a daily struggle, we must strive to live out these virtues *always*.

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5 BE JUST AND RIGHTEOUS

*“Blessed those who do what is right,
whose deeds are always just.”
(Psalm 106:3)*

God is about justice and righteousness.¹⁵ “The Rock—how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways! A faithful God, without deceit, just and upright is he!” (Dt 32:4).¹⁶ It is also about God's ideal for servant leadership, for kings who will shepherd His people. “As king he shall reign and govern wisely, he shall do what is just and right in the land.” (Jer 23:5b). Now if we are called to be like God, if we are to serve His people, then we too must strive for justice and righteousness.

Different but similar

What do these two words mean? They are often interchangeable in the Bible. And the two words very often go together, like inseparable twins. But there is a difference. Righteousness is about being in a right relationship with God, which manifests itself in our godly (just) relationship with people. Justice is about being in a right relationship with others (including God), by giving them what is their due,¹⁷ and this makes us righteous.

¹⁵ The words for “justice” and “righteousness” as translated into English in the Bible are often interchangeable. See Appendix A.

¹⁶ But if God is just and righteous, why do bad things happen to good people and bad things not happen to bad people? See Appendix B.

¹⁷ To God is due worship, to every human person is due respect, to the poor is due an equitable share of the world's goods.

Another way to describe the difference is that righteousness is about what is inside of us, which predisposes us to relate rightly (justly) to what is outside of us. Righteousness looks inward, while justice looks outward. If there is righteousness in people, then justice is assured.

“The Lord does righteous deeds, brings justice to all the oppressed.” (Ps 103:6). On the other hand, in as much as many peoples and societies today clamor for justice, it can never be truly served unless there is righteousness in the lives of people.

If one is just, then one acts righteously. If one is righteous, then one will act justly. If one lives according to God’s ways, then one will give what is due to others. And if one gives what is due to others, then one is living according to God’s ways. Thus again, justice and righteousness intersect and become interchangeable.

Another way of looking at both words is connecting justice with law.¹⁸ To be just then is to live in conformity with the law.¹⁹ But God’s righteousness is connected with the law, that is, His law.²⁰

To be righteous, then, is to live in obedience to God’s law, that is, moral or divine law. It is to be free from sin and the guilt of sin.

Still another way of differentiating the two words is this: to be righteous is something that we are; to be just is something that we do. But still, if we are righteous, then we are expected to do just acts. And if we do just acts, then we are fulfilling the righteousness of God and thus are right with Him.

Righteousness

Let us look closer at righteousness.²¹

First, it is not just an external adherence to the laws of God.

¹⁸ This is the more common way the world understands justice.

¹⁹ Human laws are however not always just. Thus we refer to them as “unjust laws.” Examples would be legalized abortion, or the law on so-called hate crimes which penalizes those who speak against homosexuality.

²⁰ The Ten Commandments. Also, Jesus’ law of love.

²¹ Synonyms for righteousness are holiness, godliness, uprightness, purity, rectitude.

The Pharisees prided themselves in their righteousness.²² But though they were adhering to the letter of the law, their hearts were far from God. Jesus warns us, “take care not to perform righteous deeds in order that people may see them; otherwise, you will have no recompense from your heavenly Father.” (Mt 6:1). Jesus called them hypocrites.²³ So we are not to just go through the motions of obeying God’s laws (not to kill, not to steal, etc.). Jesus says, “I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:20). Righteousness relates to moral conduct that is in conformity to God’s will.

In what ways should our righteousness surpass that of the Pharisees? It is adhering not only to the letter of the law but to its spirit, according to the revelation of Christ.

- * We not only do not kill, but we avoid anger against a brother (Mt 5:21-22). Anger is oftentimes a motive for murder. Or for some, though they do no physical harm, they have already killed the other in their thoughts and desire.
- * We not only do not commit adultery, but we avoid looking with lust on another (Mt 5:27-28).
- * We not only do not divorce our spouse, but we do not condone such an action even if legal (Mt 5:31-32). Divorce today is legal in many countries, but that does not make it right. Divorce remains immoral.
- * We not only do not make false oaths, but we do not swear at all (Mt 5:33-37). We must be people of integrity who do not have to make oaths in order to be believed.
- * We not only do not retaliate against others for wrongs done to us, but we turn the other cheek and never repay evil with evil (Mt 5:38-42).
- * We not only do not hate our enemy, but we are to love them and pray for them (Mt 5:43-47).

All the above are very challenging. They are about righteousness, which is a call to be holy and perfect. “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48).

Second, righteousness is not just an external service to God and His Church.

There are many who serve in parishes, religious organizations and charitable institutions. Some of them might even accomplish great things for the Church and society. But righteousness is about our motive in serving. There are those who serve but look to power, position and perquisites. There are those who serve but follow their own agenda and priorities rather than necessarily that of Christ. There are those who serve but are into factionalism, competitiveness, triumphalism. There are those who serve but do not understand and live out the call to servant leadership.²⁴ There are those who achieve service goals but at the expense of integrity. The danger is that they will become Pharisaic, and the sought-for righteousness becomes self-righteousness.

²² The Pharisee prayed, “O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity—greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.” (Lk 18:11-12).

²³ Matthew 23:13-33.

²⁴ For further exposition on servant leadership, please read the book “Servant Leadership” by this same author.

Jesus said of false disciples who claimed to do great things for him: “Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name? Did we not drive out demons in your name? Did we not do mighty deeds in your name?’ Then I will declare to them solemnly, ‘I never knew you. Depart from me, you evildoers.’” (Mt 7:22-23). What a shock that must have been. Doing great works for Jesus, but then Jesus himself calling you evildoers! Why?

Jesus tells us, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven.” What is the will of the Father? It is that we be holy, that is, righteous. Paul says, “This is the will of God, your holiness” (1 Thes 4:3a). Peter says, “As he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct” (1 Pt 1:15). How do we enter heaven? “Strive for that holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” (Heb 12:14).

So the basic criterion for making it to heaven is doing the will of God, which is holiness. In what ways do we fail in this, even as we prophesy, drive out demons and do mighty deeds for God? Well, the opposite of righteousness and holiness is immorality and impurity. “For God did not call us to impurity but to holiness.” (1 Thes 4:7). How are we impure?

- * It is to engage in works of the flesh, such as “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hatreds, rivalry, jealousy, outbursts of fury, acts of selfishness, dissensions, factions, occasions of envy, drinking bouts, orgies, and the like.” (Gal 5:19-21a). Paul warns us, “those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal 5:21b). That is, no entry into heaven.
- * It is to fail in integrity. “Who may go up the mountain of the Lord? Who can stand in his holy place? The clean of hand and pure of heart” (Ps 24:3-4a). No purity, no heaven.
- * It is to act as an idolater. An idolater is one who is not a true Christian. One who is not a true Christian is one who is immoral or impure or greedy or obscene in speech. It is one who persists in sinful living. “Immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is fitting among holy ones, no obscenity or silly or suggestive talk” (Eph 5:3-4a). “Be sure of this, that no immoral or impure or greedy person, that is, an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God.” (Eph 5:5). No inheritance, no heaven.

So what are we to do? We are to avoid sin. “Let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, making holiness perfect in the fear of God.” (2 Cor 7:1). Then we will be holy. Then we can sincerely say to Jesus, “Lord, Lord.” Then we can enter heaven. “But now that you have been freed from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit that you have leads to sanctification, and its end is eternal life.” (Rom 6:22).

And so righteousness is not just what we do, but who we are. It is not just serving God, but having the right motivation for doing so. It is looking not to the applause of others, but only to the approval of God.

Third, we are to “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Mt 5:6a).

Righteousness is to be our daily bread. We must strive to walk the path of righteousness each and every day, in every circumstance. We must be restless in our longing for God. “As the deer longs for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, the living God.” (Ps 42:2-3a).

The good news is that God provides for what we need. “All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, buy grain and eat; come, buy grain without money, wine and milk without cost!” (Is 55:1). And of course, the living bread is Jesus, who gives freely of himself in the Eucharist.²⁵ “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst.” (Jn 6:35). Jesus is the holy One. It is in him that we will truly be satisfied.

Without food and water, we die. Without Jesus in our life, we die. We must want to be like Jesus. We must be focused on him.²⁶ We must base our lives on him. Jesus and a life of righteousness must be our consuming passion.

Fourth, it is as we live lives of righteousness that we can expect the provisions and blessings of God.

Jesus tells us not to worry about our life and necessities of life. Unfortunately, many Christians today do worry, and so they seek the things of the world. They worry about life, what to eat and what to wear.

Jesus, in telling us not to worry, points to his care for the birds in the sky and the flowers in the field (Mt 6:26-30). Jesus says, “So do not worry and say, ‘What are we to eat?’ or ‘What are we to drink?’ or ‘What are we to wear?’” (Mt 6:31).

Jesus also says, “All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.” (Mt 6:32). Do we trust God our Father to care for His children? If not, then we are no better than pagans. But we are not pagans but the righteous people of God. If we live our lives according to God’s ways, then His provision for our needs is assured. “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.” (Mt 6:33).

Our part is to be righteous; God’s part is to provide.

Fifth, we can expect to be “persecuted for the sake of righteousness” (Mt 5:10a).

The world is antagonistic to people of authentic faith, especially to those who are striving to be holy. “In fact, all who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Tm 3:12). Why is that?

²⁵ For further exposition on the blessings we derive from the Eucharist, please read the booklet “Blessed by the Eucharist” by this same author.

²⁶ For further exposition on this subject, please read the book “Focused on Christ” by this same author.

For one, there is the assault of the evil one against God's people. The devil opposes everything that is of God. Thus, the more we become like God, the more he rages. In relation to that, the opposition is greater if we engage in the work of evangelization and mission.

If we further the Kingdom of God in the world, then we are undermining the kingdom of darkness. The evil one will not stand idly by as this happens, but will counter-attack with much fury.

Then there is the opposition from those who are not striving to live godly lives. This is because our life and our witness make clear how much they fall short. In our presence, even without any admonition from us, they may feel that they stand judged and condemned. Our light intensifies their darkness.

Further, there are those who want to force their values on the world. They are the modernists, the radical feminists, the LGBT forces. If we try to speak about what is wrong with what they advocate, we are branded as bigots, homophobes, misogynists and haters. They disdain Christian values and actions. They are intolerant, and once in power, are totalitarian.

But such persecution should be cause for rejoicing. "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Mt 5:11-12). Rejoice when persecuted? Yes! For we are blessed, and our reward is great in heaven, as we are likened to the prophets.

On the other hand, "woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way." (Lk 6:26).

Justice

Let us look closer at justice. As we have seen, justice is giving others what is due to them, such as worship to God and respect to human beings.²⁷ But in the Old Testament, justice is basically about social justice.²⁸

First, it is caring for the poor and oppressed. "The just care for the cause of the poor" (Prov 29:7a). Who after all is our righteous God? He is the "Father of the fatherless, defender of widows—God in his holy abode." (Ps 68:6).

Second, it is about the mercy of God. "A throne shall be set up in mercy, and on it shall sit in fidelity, in David's tent, a just upholding right, prompt to do justice." (Is 15:5). "He loves justice and right. The earth is full of the mercy of the Lord." (Ps 33:5).

²⁷ Because they are children of God who are created in God's image and likeness.

²⁸ For more Biblical wisdom on loving and serving the poor, read the book "Forty Days with the Poor" by this same author.

Third, it goes together with righteousness. There are those who work at personal morality but do nothing in the area of social justice. “And make your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like noonday.” (Ps 37:6).

God looks to the personal transformation of individuals, and then through them looks to the transformation of communities and peoples. “And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace for those who cultivate peace.” (Jas 3:18). Almsgiving and gifts to the poor are called “righteous deeds” (Mt 6:1a). Not to do so would then be unrighteousness.

Fourth, what we do to the poor is what we do to God. “Those who oppress the poor revile their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.” (Prv 14:31).

Fifth, it will determine our eternal destiny. Jesus talked about the judgment of the nations when he comes again. In this particular case, there is only one criterion for whether one goes to heaven or to hell.

It is what one does (or does not do) for the least of Jesus’ brethren (Mt 25:40,45). The least of his brethren are the poor—the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the ill, the imprisoned (Mt 25:35-36).

Back together

God expects us to do what is right and just in all circumstances. “To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” (Prv 21:3). Many Catholics go through the motions of religion, including praying, going to Church, receiving Communion, celebrating liturgical feasts, serving in the parish.

All these we should do, but more importantly, we should look to the more basic aspects of our faith, that is, righteousness and justice.

If our hearts are not right with God, if we are not striving to live Christ, if we offer worship with unclean hands, if we neglect the poor, then our worship is not pleasing to God.

“I hate, I despise your feasts, I take no pleasure in your solemnities. Take away from me your noisy songs; the melodies of your harps, I will not listen to them.” (Am 5:21,23).

What then are we to do? We always look to who God is and what He stands for. “The Lord is king; justice and right are the foundations of his throne.” (Ps 97:1a,2b).

As such, as His people and subjects, we rest on the same foundations. “Rather let justice surge like waters, and righteousness like an unfailing stream.” (Am 5:24).

6 BE GRACIOUS IN SPEECH

*“Let your speech always be gracious,
seasoned with salt”
(Colossians 4:6a)*

James speaks about the power of the tongue. Comparing the tongue to a very small rudder that steers large ships, he says, “In the same way the tongue is a small member and yet has great pretensions. Consider how small a fire can set a huge forest ablaze. The tongue is also a fire.” (Jas 3:5-6a). Speech can of course be used for good and bad. “Death and life are in the power of the tongue” (Prv 18:21a). Unfortunately, the tongue “exists among our members as a world of malice, defiling the whole body and setting the entire course of our lives on fire, itself set on fire by Gehenna.” (Jas 3:6b).

It is always a challenge to tame the tongue. Many good Christians still fall into the sins of lying, gossiping, maligning, telling negative jokes. It seems that “no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing.” (Jas 3:8-10a).

Woe is me! Can anything then be done about this sorry situation? Fortunately, yes. With regard to the evil that is the tongue, James says, “This need not be so, my brothers.” (Jas 3:10b).

Gracious speech

What makes speech gracious? How can our speech be seasoned with salt, that is, tasteful?

First, we must exercise restraint and discretion. As James said that the tongue is full of malice, then we must be careful in allowing our tongue to function in speech.

“Where words are many, sin is not wanting; but those who restrain their lips do well.” (Prv 10:19). “Those who spare their words are truly knowledgeable, and those who are discreet are intelligent.” (Prv 17:27).

Restraint in speaking is especially critical when we are angry (or the other person is angry with us). And there are very many things in life that can make us angry.

At times anger is righteous, just as the case with Jesus when he drove out the moneychangers from the temple.

But whether we are justified in being angry or not, we must exercise restraint. “Know this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.” (Jas 1:19). The book of Proverbs imparts much wisdom to us.

- * “Fools give vent to all their anger; but the wise, biding their time, control it.” (Prv 29:11). It is good to bide your time, or we might say, bite your tongue. Secular wisdom says count to ten. It is folly to give vent to anger, as it accomplishes nothing good, except the false satisfaction of having hit back at the other.
- * “It is good sense to be slow to anger, and an honor to overlook an offense.” (Prv 19:11). We need not take offense²⁹ when an offense is committed against us. We are offended but we do not take offense. We need not react negatively, especially in speaking a harsh word. Being slow to anger is good sense because it prevents a bigger conflict, but more especially, because it builds up in us virtues of patience, tolerance, forgiveness and mercy.
- * “A mild answer turns back wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” (Prv 15:1). A harsh response to an angry person will only exacerbate the situation and escalate the conflict. But we are to be a people of peace and unity.

Second, we must use our tongue to heal rather than to hurt. “The babble of some people is like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise is healing.” (Prv 12:18).

We must avoid abusive speech, including insults, backbiting, mockery and harsh criticism. God disapproves of such and will punish such. The prophet Elisha was jeered by little boys, “Go away, baldy; go away, baldy!” (2 Kgs 2:23). Elisha cursed them in the name of the Lord and 42 of the children were torn to pieces by two she-bears (2 Kgs 2:24).

How often we carelessly hurt others. We must be more careful. Others may hurt us, but that is no cause to retaliate in kind. “All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice.” (Eph 4:31).

We must use our speech to heal. Paul tells Titus that God’s people “are to slander no one, to be peaceable, considerate, exercising all graciousness toward everyone.” (Ti 3:2).

Gracious speech soothes hurts, builds bridges, cements good relationships, fosters peace. “Be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ.” (Eph 4:32).

Third, we must seek to encourage and edify. “No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear.” (Eph 4:29).

Not only are we to avoid foul language, but Paul, in speaking to the Ephesians about rules for the new life, says that in speaking we are to edify others, that we are to impart grace to them.

²⁹ Synonyms for offense are annoyance, anger, resentment, indignation, irritation, exasperation, wrath, displeasure, vexation, animosity, antipathy.

We are our brothers' keepers, we are co-pilgrims in life, we are fellow servants of God. Christian life and service are hard and challenging. There will be times when we will feel exhausted, or frustrated, or demoralized. We might even think of giving up. These are the times when we need a good word from brethren.

Fourth, we must speak the truth. "Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another." (Eph 4:25). We are members of the body of Christ, and Jesus, the head of the body, is the truth. Those who lie have the devil as their father, for he is the father of lies (Jn 8:44).

Today unfortunately, there are many so-called Christians who do not speak the truth and who promote destructive lies. Many have succumbed to the lies of modernism. They say the unborn in the womb is just a blob of tissue and so it is OK to abort it. They say there are many genders and so LBGT is acceptable. They say homosexuals are born that way and so a homosexual lifestyle is normal. They disdain sexual purity, fidelity in marriage, and speaking the truth about the culture of life. They have turned things upside down. They are "those who call evil good, and good evil, who change darkness to light, and light into darkness" (Is 5:20a).

They have been deceived by the devil, just as the serpent deceived our first parents in Eden. God had told them not to eat the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden or else they would die, but the snake told them they would not die, but rather would become like gods, knowing good and evil (Gn 3:3-5). How ironic that they could not now recognize evil.

Modernism shifts the focus of man from God to himself. "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator" (Rom 1:25). It is all about self-satisfaction and self-glorification.

We are destined for eternal life with God, and must never conform to the present world for convenience or temporary advantage. "Truthful lips endure forever, the lying tongue, for only a moment." (Pv 12:19). Lies are quickly exposed, while truthful statements endure. God favors those who tell the truth, while meting punishment on liars.

Fifth, we must avoid speaking negative things. In our speech, there should be "no obscenity or silly or suggestive talk, which is out of place" (Eph 5:4a). There should be no insult, maligning, profanity, vulgarity, obscenity and blasphemy. "But now you must put them all away: anger, fury, malice, slander, and obscene language out of your mouths." (Col 3:8).

Sometimes people think of such negative talk as harmless, or at least better than inflicting physical harm on others. But whether such talk actually harms others or not, it will harm those who indulge in them. "I tell you, on the day of judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak." (Mt 12:36).

Character and maturity

Our speech reveals a lot about our character and about how we are being formed in Christ. Our speech often shows what is in our hearts. “For from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.” (Mt 12:34b). Just as we look to the transformation of our hearts in Christ, we must also look to the transformation and discipline of our tongue. We are to grow in the wisdom of God and avoid folly. “The tongue of the wise pours out knowledge, but the mouth of fools spews folly.” (Prv 15:2).

So our speech reveals spiritual maturity. As we are called to holiness and Christian perfection, we must tame our tongue. “If anyone does not fall short in speech, he is a perfect man, able to bridle his whole body also.” (Jas 3:2b). Then, on the day of judgment, we can be considered as among the Lamb’s companions. “On their lips no deceit has been found; they are unblemished.” (Rev 14:5). This is but fitting, as Jesus “committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” (1 Pt 2:22).

Let us always be gracious in speech. Let our prayer be: “Set a guard, Lord, before my mouth, keep watch over the door of my lips.” (Ps 141:3). Amen.

7

SEEK THE GOOD OF OTHERS

*“always seek what is good
for each other and for all.”
(1 Thessalonians 5:15b)*

People in the world naturally seek their own good. But if we are to love our neighbor as ourselves, then we also need to seek the good of others. All are children of God, all destined for heaven. Thus their greatest good is salvation. Jesus already did what was necessary for that to happen. But people need to meet the Savior and start to live their lives in him. God wants no one to be lost. And so God relies on us to help bring others to Himself.

Thus we are to seek the good of all, not just those we love, or are close to us, or whom we are predisposed to care for. That means we are to love our enemies as well. We are to look to their good.

How do we seek the good of others?

The good of our brethren

We look to the context of Christian community first of all. “So then, while we have the opportunity, let us do good to all, but especially to those who belong to the family of the faith.” (Gal 6:10). How do we do good to our brethren in Christ?

One, we are to show respect to our co-workers in Christ. “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who are laboring among you and who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you, and to show esteem for them with special love on account of their work.” (1 Thes 5:12-13a). We are called as a body, and we serve Christ as a body. There will be many different types of people, both weak and strong. We are to show respect to all, not being judgmental, but desiring to bring out the best in everyone. We are to affirm their worth. “Then let us no longer judge one another, but rather resolve never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother.” (Rom 14:13).

Two, we are to work at peace and unity. “Be at peace among yourselves.” (1 Thes 5:13b). Peace is being in right relationship with each other. This does not mean there will be no disagreements, but such are handled in the Lord. We look to love and mercy, to patience and tolerance, to kindness and forgiveness. “Let us then pursue what leads to peace and to building up one another.” (Rom 14:19).

What elements make for peace and unity? We look at the first Christian community after Pentecost.

- * Unity of heart and mind. “The community of believers was of one heart and mind” (Acts 4:32a). They were united in the love of Christ, undergoing formation, praying together, and breaking bread together.
- * Stewardship. “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they held everything in common.” (Acts 4:32b). Whatever they possessed was considered as belonging to the Lord, and was thus used for the Lord’s purposes, including making resources available to those in need.
- * A common mission. “With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all.” (Acts 4:33). They were an evangelizing and missionary community.
- * Care for the poor. “There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need.” (Acts 4:34). They had found the solution to dire poverty, as they provided for the needs of all.

Three, we are to give fraternal support and correction. We are to “admonish the idle, cheer the fainthearted, support the weak, be patient with all.” (1 Thes 5:14).

We are co-pilgrims, having the same vision and mission. But not all are at the same level of spiritual maturity or appreciation for the work. As we do want our brethren to grow in maturity and in greater involvement in the mission, we provide fraternal support, in the form of encouragement, accompaniment, guidance, counsel, and the like.

Fraternal correction is an important tool. To correct another is to love him. To allow someone to remain in wrongdoing is to fail in love. But correction is always done in the Lord, with patience and charity, and with corresponding encouragement.

Four, we are to do good and avoid evil. “Refrain from every kind of evil.” (1 Thes 5:22).

Refraining from evil includes keeping away from occasions of sin. We should not unnecessarily subject ourselves to temptation. This includes being aware of how brethren in the community might perceive what we do. For example, a single man and a single woman should not spend extended lengths of time alone with each other in a private place. Even if nothing sinful is happening, we must strive not to offend the sensibilities of others.³⁰

- * We do not want to cause another to stumble. “But make sure that this liberty of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak.” (1 Cor 8:9). We concern ourselves not only with our brethren but also with the integrity of our mission. “We cause no one to stumble in anything, in order that no fault may be found with our ministry” (2 Cor 6:3).
- * We do what is noble and honorable among our brethren. “Be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all.” (Rom 12:17b). This also relates to financial stewardship. “This we desire to avoid, that anyone blame us about this lavish gift administered by us, for we are concerned for what is honorable not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of others.” (2 Cor 8:20-21).
- * We strive to do only those things that will honor God. “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.” (1 Cor 10:31).

Now when others do evil to us, we are not to retaliate in kind. “See that no one returns evil for evil” (1 Thes 5:15a). Whatever evil might come into the community, it does not spiral out of control because we contain it when it comes to us.

The good of others

How about outside Christian community?

One, we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We of course act for our own good in life. But we must also desire such good for others.

Two, we are to be selfless, even self-sacrificial. “No one should seek his own advantage, but that of his neighbor.” (1 Cor 10:24). This is about selflessness, not selfishness. We choose not our well-being at the expense of others. Even in secular transactions, we negotiate with an eye to what is fair for both sides, not taking advantage of our greater strength or bargaining power.

Three, we are to “avoid giving offense” (1 Cor 10:32a). Jesus is the perfect example of this. He was offended, betrayed, denied, beaten, ridiculed and put to death. But he never gave offense. He simply loved and forgave.

Our ultimate goal is not only to manifest the love of God, but to help bring others to salvation, which is their greatest good. We not only obey what God commands us, but we are single-minded in our mission. Paul gives his ultimate motive in seeking the good of others, as he says, “just as I try to please everyone in every way, not seeking my own benefit, but that of the many, that they may be saved.” (1 Cor 10:33)

³⁰ There may be times though when sensibilities of others will be offended, no matter what we say or do. This is especially with regard to those who have very narrow or highly critical points of view. We also cannot be boxed into inaction in trying to keep everyone happy.

8
INTERCEDE FOR OTHERS
“we always pray for you”
(2 Thessalonians 1:11a)

Many Christians who still pray often pray mostly for their own needs. And while we can certainly pray for our own needs, this is not crucial to life. In fact, God knows what we need and will provide, even if we do not ask for them. In fact, we might not even know what is good for us, and we often ask for things that can cause us spiritual harm.

So when we pray, we indeed should ask and intercede, but we ask *on behalf of others* and intercede for *their* needs.

Now we must be mindful that, just as we might not know what is good for us as we pray, we must also strive to pray not just for any need of others, but for what can be of spiritual help to them. We pray “that our God may make you worthy of his calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort of faith” (2 Thes 1:11b). The ultimate aim in intercession is not that we get our needs met, but “that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him” (2 Thes 1:12a).

Thus, our prayers of intercession should not be so much about material things (money, job, health, physical protection, etc.) for those we pray for, but much more for spiritual blessings, including spiritual protection.

The prayers of Jesus and Paul

We look at the example of Jesus, “who indeed intercedes for us.” (Rom 8:34d). What were the things he interceded for for others, particularly in his prayer before his passion?³¹

- * To remain in the Lord. “I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for the ones you have given me, because they are yours, but they are in the world, while I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name that you have given me” (Jn 17:9,11b).
- * For protection against Satan. “I do not ask that you take them out of the world but that you keep them from the evil one.” (Jn 17:15). With regard to Peter, Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed that your own faith may not fail; and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers.” (Lk 22:31-32). As in the case of Job, Satan does ask God to allow him to assault us, and God does allow him to do so. In allowing Satan to do his work, God does not leave us to our own devices, but rather, He provides us prayer cover. Together with our own resolve, that should be enough.³²

³¹ Jesus prayed a lot for people during his public ministry. Now that the end is near, he makes his most important prayers of intercession.

³² In this particular case of Peter, it was not enough. Though Peter was determined to remain by Jesus, he failed. Peter “said to him, ‘Lord, I am prepared to go to prison and to die with you.’ But he replied, ‘I

- * To be consecrated in truth and proclaim the truth of salvation to the world. “Consecrate them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I sent them into the world. And I consecrate myself for them, so that they also may be consecrated in truth.” (Jn 17:17-19).
- * For unity in the body for effective witness. “I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” (Jn 17:20-21).
- * To be made perfect. “And I have given them the glory you gave me, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to perfection as one, that the world may know that you sent me, and that you loved them even as you loved me.” (Jn 17:22-23).
- * To be with him forever in heaven. “Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me, that they may see my glory that you gave me” (Jn 17:24a).

How wonderful that Jesus himself intercedes for us. He is the very Son of God, and he “is at the right hand of God” (Rom 8:34c). “Therefore, he is always able to save those who approach God through him, since he lives forever to make intercession for them.” (Heb 7:25).³³

We look at the example of Paul. He interceded not for worldly things but for divine things.

- * For salvation. “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God on their behalf is for salvation.” (Rom 10:1).
- * To do right and not evil. “But we pray to God that you may not do evil, but that you may do what is right” (2 Cor 13:7).
- * To continually improve in faith life. “What we pray for is your improvement.” (2 Cor 13:9b). We are called to holiness and Christian perfection. Every day of our life is to be spent striving to grow in maturity of faith. This is very difficult. We need prayer cover and support.
- * For the fullness of God, the indwelling of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit. “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he may grant you in accord with the riches of his glory to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in the inner self, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the holy ones what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” (Eph 3:14-19).

tell you, Peter, before the cock crows this day, you will deny three times that you know me.” (Lk 22:33-34).

³³ This is why we often end our prayers of petition and intercession with the words “we ask this through Christ our Lord.”

Interceding for ourselves and others

How about us? How about our own needs? This is one good thing about interceding for others rather than focusing on our own needs. We did say that God who is our loving Father will provide what we need even if we do not ask. But also, if we focus prayer on our own needs, that is one person praying for his own need. But if we pray for others, and they in turn pray for us, then we can have hundreds praying for our needs.

Aside from such spiritual benefit for us,³⁴ why should we intercede for others? We pray for others because we are our brothers' keeper. "Bear one another's burdens, and so you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Gal 6:2). We must have a heart for others. We are to go through life together, leaving no one behind, so that all will make it to heaven.

What should we pray for?

- * To grow in love and righteousness. "And this is my prayer: that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." (Phil 1:9-11).
- * For healing of body and spirit. "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful." (Jas 5:16).
- * To be bold witnesses to the gospel. "With all prayer and supplication, pray at every opportunity in the Spirit. To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones and also for me, that speech may be given me to open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains, so that I may have the courage to speak as I must." (Eph 6:18-20).
- * To persevere in mission until the end. "I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work in you will continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil 1:3-6).
- * For a peaceful life in society. "First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity." (1 Tm 2:1-2).

Great Biblical figures

Throughout salvation history, God raised towering figures and used them in power. Aside from the great work they did, they too were powerful intercessors. We learn a lot from them on how to intercede.

³⁴ We of course do not intercede for others because of the payback, but simply because it is right.

Abraham, who became the father of all nations, interceded for Sodom. God had decided to destroy Sodom due to its great wickedness. Abraham bargained with God, seeking for Him to spare the city if there were a number of righteous people in it. Abraham started with 50, then 45, then 40, then 30, then 20, then finally 10 (Gn 18:23-32), successfully getting God to agree each time. Unfortunately, there were not even 10 righteous people, so Sodom was destroyed.

How did Abraham intercede with God?

- * He was bold, intimate with and confident in his knowledge of God. "Then Abraham drew near and said: 'Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked?'" (Gn 18:23). It even seemed as if he was bordering on impertinence. "Should not the judge of all the world do what is just?" (Gn 18:25c).
- * Though he was bold, he was humble before God. "See how I am presuming to speak to my Lord, though I am only dust and ashes!" (Gn 18:27).
- * He was persistent. He kept coming back to God, bargaining with Him. He pushed on the limits of God's mercy.

Moses, who led God's people out of slavery in Egypt, interceded for the Israelites. God wanted to destroy them because they had worshiped the golden calf. "Let me alone, then, that my anger may burn against them to consume them." (Ex 32:10). Moses interceded for them and God relented. How did Moses intercede with God?

- * He did not think of himself but only of the people. God had said, "Let me alone, then, that my anger may burn against them to consume them. Then I will make of you a great nation." (Ex 32:10). Moses did not agree.
- * He was bold. He told God, "Turn from your burning wrath; change your mind about punishing your people." (Ex 32:12b). God did.
- * He stood on the promises of God and His covenant with His people. "Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, and how you swore to them by your own self" (Ex 32:13a).
- * He confessed the people's sin and asked forgiveness on their behalf. "Ah, this people has committed a grave sin in making a god of gold for themselves! Now if you would only forgive their sin!" (Ex 32:31-32a).
- * He willingly would share the fate of the people if they were not forgiven. "But if you will not, then blot me out of the book that you have written." (Ex 32:32b).

Samuel, who bridged the transition between the judges and the kings, interceded for the Israelites. The Israelites were afraid of the Philistines that had come up against them. They appealed to Samuel, who "cried out to the Lord for Israel, and the Lord answered him." (1 Sm 7:9b). With the intervention of God, Israel routed the Philistines. Many years later, the Israelites asked for a king, like the other nations had. Samuel was displeased and warned them, but they persisted. God allowed them to have a king, Saul. How did Samuel intercede?

- * He did not go by his own perceptions or opinions, or decide by himself what was to be brought to God, but brought the concerns of the people to God. "Samuel was displeased when they said, 'Give us a king to rule us.' But he prayed to the Lord." (1 Sm 8:6). We do not decide beforehand what concerns of people are worthy to be brought before the Lord, but rather bring their concerns and let the Lord decide.

- * He was confident in God's love and fidelity to His people. "For the sake of his own great name the Lord will not abandon his people, since the Lord has decided to make you his people." (1 Sm 12:22). We always stand on the reality of God's love and mercy.
- * Despite the people's evil in asking for a king,³⁵ Samuel did not abandon them. "As for me, far be it from me to sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you and to teach you the good and right way." (1 Sm 12:23). We must not tire of praying for others, especially those who are far from God.

Nehemiah, who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, interceded for the restoration of the great city. God used him to reestablish the Jewish community in Jerusalem. How did he go about his prayers?

- * With intensity of heart. When he was told about the sorry condition of Jerusalem and the Jews, he "began to weep and continued mourning for several days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven." (Neh 1:4).
- * Looking to God's mercy. He prayed: "Lord, God of heaven, great and awesome God, you preserve your covenant of mercy with those who love you and keep your commandments." (Neh 1:5).
- * In confession of personal and communal sin. "May your ears be attentive, and your eyes open, to hear the prayer that I, your servant, now offer in your presence day and night for your servants the Israelites, confessing the sins we have committed against you, I and my ancestral house included." (Neh 1:6).
- * Hopeful of restoration. "But remember the admonition which you addressed to Moses, your servant, when you said: If you prove faithless, I will scatter you among the peoples; but if you return to me and carefully keep my commandments, even though your outcasts have been driven to the farthest corner of the world, I will gather them from there, and bring them back to the place I have chosen as the dwelling place of my name." (Neh 1:8-9).

One more thing

We easily pray for ourselves. And we are learning about the need to pray for others. But there is one more important thing: we are to pray for our enemies. Jesus says, "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44).

Now this is very challenging, for everyone, even for committed Christians. We would much rather do what we have heard said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." (Mt 5:43). That seems much more reasonable and realistic. But that is not God's will.

Why then should we love and pray for our enemies.

³⁵ The Lord told Samuel: "Listen to whatever the people say. You are not the one they are rejecting. They are rejecting me as their king." (1 Sm 8:7).

First, because Jesus commands us to do so. It is important to know that this does not just mean we treat them well. As Paul said, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” (Rom 12:20). When we have a relative or friend who is mistreating us and we respond with goodness, that is what can bring them to their senses. But praying for enemies is something else. We can treat others well because it is the right thing to do. But when we pray for them, we come into the very presence of God, acting the way Jesus did with those who oppressed him, and God then is able to look into our heart.

Second, so “that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust.” (Mt 5:45). Don’t you as a parent love both your well-behaved and wayward children? Don’t you want what is best for all of them? In the same way, we are all children of God. He loves them. And if God loves them, then so should we.

Third, so that we will be distinguishable from the pagans. “For if you love those who love you, what recompense will you have? Do not the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brothers only, what is unusual about that? Do not the pagans do the same?” (Mt 5:46-47). It is easy enough to relate well with those whom we like. But the posture of a Christian, who is set apart, is counter-cultural. What distinguishes Christians is love, which must be for everyone.

Fourth, so that we can be well on our way to growing in holiness and Christian perfection. “So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Mt 5:48). The Christian life and call is tough. But that is God’s design. We do not go to heaven in first-class comfort. The greater the challenge, the greater the grace by which we change for the better. This is why we are called to self-denial, to embrace of the cross, to unconditional obedience and to love and pray for enemies. These are the only ways by which we can become other Christs.

Fifth, because that is how Jesus prayed. Jesus interceded with the Father for all those who had wronged him, as he said while on the cross, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.” (Lk 23:34). Then Stephen, the first martyr, followed suit. As they were stoning him and he was about to die, “he fell to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’” (Acts 7:60a).

What should we pray for for our enemies? Generally, it is for their spiritual well-being. Specifically, pray for the following:

One, for their conversion. This is the most important thing that needs to happen in their lives. When we pray, we must have the conviction that God indeed loves them and wants them to return to Him. And no matter how bad one is, there is always hope. If Saul the great persecutor of Christians could become Paul the great apostle, then indeed nothing is impossible with God.

Two, for God to restrain and even thwart the bad or evil that they do. This is obviously for their own good. Preventing them from doing one other evil is preventing them from sinking deeper into the mire. And it is for the good of those who would be affected by their actions.

Three, for divine justice to be done. We do not overlook wrongs done, and we certainly do not condone these. Wrongdoing is against God's law. But as it is not up to us to retaliate,³⁶ we look to God's justice. "Beloved, do not look for revenge but leave room for the wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" (Rom 12:19). When divine justice is done, we thank God and rejoice for the good that it will do for the person, but we must guard our hearts. "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and when they stumble, do not let your heart exult" (Prv 24:17).

So prayers of intercession are crucial in the Christian life, not just for the good of others, but for our own spiritual well-being as well. As such, we should not cease praying for others. In doing so, look to the lofty things of God. Focus on the life that God intends for us.

Paul has many wonderful prayers in his letters. Here is one: "we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light." (Col 1:9-12). Amen.

³⁶ We are however allowed to defend ourselves in the face of physical harm.

III RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD

God has brought us into the world, entered into a relationship with us, gives us brethren to interact with, not just for our own well-being, but in order to use us to proclaim His good news of salvation to the world. We cannot be hermits just focused on our relationship with God. We cannot be isolationists just focused on our relationship with our own brethren. God established us as Church in order to be light to and leaven in the world.

We must have a missionary mindset. Our Church is missionary, established by Jesus to continue with his work of salvation. As such, there are certain aspects of our faith that we must *always* be doing.

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9 BE READY WITH YOUR TESTIMONY

*“Always be ready to give an explanation
to anyone who asks you
for a reason for your hope”
(1 Peter 3:15b)*

Our Church is missionary. She exists for mission in the world. As such, all her members are to be missionary in mind and heart as well. God relies on His people to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus to the ends of the earth.

To be a missionary does not mean that one must go to some far off place to proclaim the gospel. For some, yes, but such missionaries are only among the many people who carry out the mission of the Church. “Some people God has designated in the church to be, first, apostles; second, prophets; third, teachers; then, mighty deeds; then, gifts of healing, assistance, administration, and varieties of tongues.” (1 Cor 12:28). These are particular gifts given to specific persons by the Spirit, in order that the Church can effectively carry out her mission. Thus, while exercising various and varied gifts, all Christians are to have a missionary mindset.

In the day-to-day circumstances of life

In every situation, by our words and actions, we proclaim Christ. How do we do that, especially if we have our worldly responsibilities in life, such as raising a family and working at our livelihood? Our mission field is actually the ordinary, day-to-day circumstances of our lives. These are our own home, our neighborhood, our workplace, and all other environments that we might find ourselves in.

When we go on specific mission, we prepare ourselves beforehand. When we are just going to our regular rounds in life, not knowing if and when we will be given an opportunity, then we must always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks for a reason for our hope. This is what it means to be “mission-ready.”

Those who went before us were mission-ready.

- * Jesus was just passing through Samaria and took a rest at Jacob’s well. A woman of Samaria came to draw water. Jesus started a conversation by saying, “Give me a drink.” (Jn 4:7b). That led to telling her about living water, and she ended up witnessing to the townspeople about him.
- * Peter was brought into the Sanhedrin and questioned about why they were preaching to the people. Peter took the opportunity to preach about Jesus, proclaiming the gospel to those present (Acts 4:8-12).
- * Philip, on the angel’s prompting, set out on the road going from Jerusalem to Gaza (Acts 8:26). He encountered an Ethiopian eunuch and the Spirit told him to join up with him. Starting from the eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah, Philip explained the passage and then “proclaimed Jesus to him.” (Acts 8:35).
- * Paul and Silas were imprisoned at Philippi. An earthquake opened the prison doors and pulled loose their chains. The jailer was about to kill himself but Paul stopped him, and preached Jesus to him and later on to his whole household (Acts 16:27-34).

You can see that the circumstances above were very varied. Jesus spoke to a stranger, who, as a Samaritan and a woman, was not predisposed to interact with a Jewish man. Peter was before powerful people who were antagonistic. Philip spoke to someone who was interested in the scriptures. Paul was in a chaotic situation facing a distraught man intent on killing himself.

What might be the opportunity given by God to you? Beside a stranger in a bus? With an officemate who has issues against religion? At a class reunion of a Catholic school? Facing a troubled relative?

Whatever it is, be ready with your testimony.

How to share your testimony

What should your personal testimony contain? There are basically three parts.

- * Your life before Christ. What were you like? What things were not right with your life? What troubled you? How did you struggle but fail?
- * How you turned to Jesus. What prompted you to seek Jesus? How did you realize your need for him? What did Jesus do for you?
- * Your life now in Christ. How has your life changed? What good things are you experiencing now? What is now the reason for your hope?

You need to think about and prepare your testimony beforehand. How?

- * Pray for guidance in what you should say.
- * Jot down notes or even write out your personal story (see three parts above).
- * Practice.

How should your testimony be?

- * It should not be long. Depending on the circumstances, it could be just a few minutes.
- * It should be personal.
- * It should not be preachy.

Leaving the fruit up to God

If we desire it, God will provide opportunities for us to proclaim the gospel. We just need to be ready and willing. Now in speaking about Jesus, we will have all kinds of reactions, perhaps negative more often than positive. It is after all hard soil out there. Such was the experience of Paul in Athens.

- * There are those who will be negative and even insulting. “What is this scavenger trying to say?” (Acts 17:18b).
- * There are those who will be skeptical and even derisive. “He sounds like a promoter of foreign deities” (Acts 17:18c).
- * There are those who will be scornful or mocking. “Some began to scoff” (Acts 17:32b).
- * There are those whose interest will be piqued, or perhaps will just be curious. “May we learn what this new teaching is that you speak of? For you bring some strange notions to our ears” (Acts 17:19-20a).
- * There are those who will want to learn more, or perhaps are just brushing you off in a nice way. “We would like to hear you on this some other time.” (Acts 17:32c).
- * There are some who will accept Christ. “But some did join him, and became believers.” (Acts 17:34a).

Whatever the reaction is, our task is to proclaim Christ and the gospel. It is God’s part to provide the fruit. We know that we are sent to proclaim the gospel, and that people need to hear in order to believe. Indeed, “faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17a). When we are given opportunities to make Christ known, we should act on it. “Proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching.” (2 Tm 4:2).

10

BE DEVOTED TO GOD’S WORK

*“be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted
to the work of the Lord”
(1 Corinthians 15:58a)*

We belong to God, and we ought to live for God. To live for God means living the way of Christ. This means both growing in holiness and doing his work. In doing God’s work, we are to devote ourselves fully and wholeheartedly.

Why? Because to get people to meet Christ, then to live Christ and to share Christ,³⁷ is the

most important work we can ever do. We are in this world not for ourselves, but for Jesus. We are to participate in building God's Kingdom on earth, in preparation for entering God's Kingdom in heaven.

God's work

What are the most important elements of God's work that we must be devoted to?

First and foremost is the work of evangelization. Our Church is a missionary Church. She exists for mission. And our Church today is called to the New Evangelization.³⁸ This is in the face of apostasy happening in our Church. We are losing Catholics by the day. This is work that is of the utmost urgency, as it has to do with the salvation of God's people.

Second is renewal of the family and the defense of life. The assaults against family and life are intensifying in this third millennium. These are by way of the culture of death, with contraception, divorce, abortion, euthanasia, same-sex unions, transgenderism.³⁹ The evil one seeks to destroy family and life, which are God's creation and in accordance with God's plan for the life of the world.

Third is bringing glad tidings to the poor.⁴⁰ God loves the poor, and our Church has a preferential option for the poor. The early Christian Church cared for the poor, so that no one was in need. In Jesus' parable on the last judgment, the sole criterion for going to heaven or to hell is what we do for the least of our brethren. Today there are still so very many poor people in the world. They need to be loved and cared for.

Fourth is defense of faith and of our Church. There is a new paganism in the world today. Many Catholics have left the Church. The world is in the darkness of sin and evil. Liberals and modernists today are working to do away with faith, religion and Judeo-Christian values. Their prime target is the holy Roman Catholic Church, the authentic Church established by Jesus.

³⁷ For further exposition on this subject, please read the book "The Live Christ, Share Christ Movement (2nd Edition)" by this same author.

³⁸ For further exposition on this topic, please read the book "The New Evangelization—A Work of the Divine Family" by this same author.

³⁹ For further exposition on the culture of death and the culture of life, please read the book "Forty Days of Life" by this same author.

⁴⁰ For further exposition on this topic, please read the book "Bringing Glad Tidings to the Poor" by this same author.

Principles of devotion

What are some principles of devotion or dedication to God's work?

First, we must know why we exist. We exist in order to know, love and serve God. We exist not for ourselves but for God. This includes doing good works for the Kingdom. "For we are his handiwork, created in Christ Jesus for the good works that God has prepared in advance, that we should live in them." (Eph 2:10).

Second, before devotion to God's work, we must personally be devoted to God. "Your heart must be wholly devoted to the Lord, our God, observing his statutes and keeping his commandments, as on this day." (1 Kgs 8:61). Such devotion gives us protection. We get to keep our focus on Christ and his work.

Many start out well, but eventually fall away. Such was the case with Solomon. He had asked God for "a listening heart to judge your people and to distinguish between good and evil." (1 Kgs 3:9). The Lord was pleased and granted him his desire. "I now do as you request. I give you a heart so wise and discerning that there has never been anyone like you until now, nor after you will there be anyone to equal you." (1 Kgs 3:12). God gifted Solomon with riches and glory and worldwide renown. Sadly, it did not end well for him. "When Solomon was old his wives had turned his heart to follow other gods, and his heart was not entirely with the Lord, his God" (1 Kgs 11:4). He has been given by God a heart so wise and discerning, able to distinguish between good and evil. So what happened? He lost his focus. He loved many foreign women and "they turned his heart." (1 Kgs 11:3).

Third, for our hearts to remain in Christ, we must experience transformation in Christ. We must be striving for holiness. We are "to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:10). We are to live lives pleasing to God, and we are to be fully engaged in His service. In this way we cover both the internal and external dimensions of faith. Thus would we grow in the knowledge of God as we enter more deeply into His life and work.

Fourth, since we also have to be about our secular work and other involvements, we must have our priorities clear. It is God first, and everything else flows from that priority. Jesus has told us, "No one can serve two masters. He will either hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Mt 6:24). God and mammon are in opposition to each other, and both are jealous masters, striving to gain our allegiance. Solomon started out by truly loving God, but then fell into loving women, many women, and God was gradually eased out of his heart.

Notice that we are not prohibited from earning a living, making money, and certainly loving those we are supposed to love. But it is a question of priority. Who or what is first and foremost? Some people end up worshiping at the altar of money or power or position. We are reminded: "You shall worship the Lord, your God, and him alone shall you serve." (Lk 4:8). Whom we decide to serve is whom we end up worshiping. Will it be God or mammon?

Firm and steadfast

If we are to be fully devoted to God's work, we must be firm and steadfast. We must be decided. We must have no qualms about serving our God.

In the Bible we see exhortations to being firm and steadfast, especially in the face of great work soon to be done for God.

- * Moses to Israel before the march into the promised land: "Be strong and steadfast; he will never fail you or forsake you." (Dt 31:6a,c).
- * God Himself to Joshua before crossing the Jordan: "No one can withstand you as long as you live. As I was with Moses, I will be with you: I will not leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and steadfast" (Jos 1:5-6a).
- * The Transjordan tribes to Joshua: "Only be strong and steadfast." (Jos 1:18b)
- * David to his son Solomon about the building of the temple in Jerusalem: "Be strong and steadfast, and go to work" (1 Chr 28:20a).

We must give our all. There will be many difficulties, trials and even oppression, but we are to endure and persevere. "Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." (Rom 12:11).

More particularly, what does it mean to be firm and steadfast?

- * We must never waver but remain steadfast in faith. With regards to wisdom (and for that matter anything else we need from God), "he should ask God who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and he will be given it. But he should ask in faith, not doubting" (Jas 1:5b-6a). Nothing should be able to shake our faith in God and His goodness.
- * We must be spiritually grounded. We need to "no longer be infants tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery" (Eph 4:14a). We must know authentic Church teaching. This is especially crucial today since there are many *isms*⁴¹ that lead Christians astray. Many today bow down to the zeitgeist, the spirit of the world.
- * We must rest secure in the company of like-minded brethren. The world is radically opposed to authentic Christians. Those who are against them are among our relatives, in our neighborhoods, in the workplace, on the Internet and social media, among state officials. We need the support and counsel of committed Christians. Paul says, "Do not be yoked with those who are different, with unbelievers. For what partnership do righteousness and lawlessness have? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? What accord has Christ with Beliar? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Cor 6:14-15).

At the end of the day, our devotion to God's work is fueled by the reality that God has called us and appreciates our positive response to His call. Whatever the results of our work will be, whether abundantly fruitful or seeming failure, we plod on, "knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Cor 15:58b)

⁴¹ Secular humanism, Modernism, liberalism, progressivism, hedonism, cultural Marxism, contraceptive imperialism, transgenderism.

11 BE COURAGEOUS

*“So we are always courageous”
(2 Corinthians 5:6a)*

It is not easy to be a true Christian in the world, which, especially today, is very antagonistic to Christianity. Not only that, if we get into the work of evangelization (which we should get into), then we engage a powerful diabolical enemy, who has powerful human forces at his disposal. Engage in this and be bruised, bloodied and even killed.

So the Christian needs to be courageous. What needs to happen?

Trust in God

First, we must know that courage does not mean the absence of fear. Fear is a God-given emotion, designed to protect us and keep us from taking rash action in the face of danger. But courage is acting despite the fear. It is not being constrained by such fear. David was a great warrior, and he faced death many times. This is what he said: “Though an army encamp against me, my heart does not fear; though war be waged against me, even then do I trust.” (Ps 27:3). The antidote to fear is not courage but trust in God.

Second, we must always trust in God. “O Most High, when I am afraid, in you I place my trust.” (Ps 56:3c-4). God is there for us. The word of God tells us over and over that God is with us.

- * The Lord is “my strength, my rock, my fortress, my deliverer, my rock of refuge, my shield, my saving horn, my stronghold!” (Ps 18:2-3). With such a God by our side, what is there to be afraid of? “What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom 8:31). We can move forward in life with courage and confidence. “I trust in God, I do not fear. What can mere flesh do to me?” (Ps 56:5b).
- * We know we belong to God. So we must know that God will take care of us, and we need never be afraid of anything. “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine.” (Is 43:1b).
- * We are God’s beloved. “Fear not, for I am with you because you are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you.” (Is 43:5a,4a).
- * God has come to save us. “Say to the fearful of heart: Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God, he comes with vindication; with divine recompense he comes to save you.” (Is 35:4).

Third, we need to know that courage is not just facing our fears but being bold in the life God has given us. It is not just trying to overcome the negative but focuses on the positive. “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, steadfast, always fully devoted to the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” (1 Cor 15:58).

In life there will be failures. We are not to fear failures. For the authentic Christian, a failure is not really a failure if we learn something good from it. If we have this conviction, then we can boldly go forth in life without fear of so-called failure.

Fourth, we need to wait on God. We live His life and we do His work. So it is He whom we look to and He who tells us what to do. When we wait on God, then we know it is He who will accomplish His great work in and through us. Thus we can always be courageous. "Wait for the Lord, take courage; be stouthearted, wait for the Lord!" (Ps 27:14).

Courage to live Christ

What are the main areas of life where in we act with courage, in order to accomplish God's purposes in and through us? What are we called to be?

One, we are a new creation. "So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor 5:17). We must have the courage to confront our past sinful life, turn away from it, and turn to Jesus in faith, knowing he makes us new, by his grace and the power of the Spirit. It is not easy. We will continue to fall. But we press on with determination and courage, facing whatever may come.

Two, we are ambassadors of Christ. "So we are ambassadors of Christ, as if God were appealing through us." (2 Cor 5:20). God makes us new in order to be instruments of renewal for the world. We represent Christ, and we present him to a world generally hostile to Christianity. God has "given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (2 Cor 5:18b-19). But a hostile world has often persecuted prophets and missionaries. We need courage to face such a world and boldly proclaim the message of reconciliation in Christ.

Three, we are ministers of God. "In everything we commend ourselves as ministers of God" (2 Cor 6:4a). God sends us forth to do His work, focused on the work of evangelization, bringing salvation to the world. This work is most crucial especially today. "Behold, now is a very acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (2 Cor 6:2b). But since the world is hostile to Christianity, we will be doing our work "through much endurance, in afflictions, hardships, constraints, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, vigils, fasts" (2 Cor 6:4b-5). We indeed will need courage to see us through.

Four, we are temples of the Holy Spirit. "For we are the temple of the living God" (2 Cor 6:16b). We are called to be a holy people of God, with Christ dwelling in us through his Holy Spirit. We are called to be pure and holy. We are to be set apart from unbelievers. "Therefore, come forth from them and be separate," says the Lord, "and touch nothing unclean; then I will receive you and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Cor 6:17-18). It is easier and probably safer to just blend in with everyone else. But we as children of God are to be different, truly set apart. That takes a lot of courage and determination.

Biblical exhortations to courage

The Bible tells us of various personages who exhorted people to courage. Here are some examples:

- * Moses to Israel: "Have no fear or dread of them, for it is the Lord, your God, who marches with you" (Dt 31:6b).
- * God to Joshua: "I command you: be strong and steadfast! Do not fear nor be dismayed, for the Lord, your God, is with you wherever you go." (Jos 1:9).
- * David to his son Solomon: "Do not fear or be dismayed, for the Lord, my God, is with you." (1 Chr 28:20b).
- * God to Israel through Isaiah: "Do not fear: I am with you; do not be anxious, I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." (Is 41:10).
- * Paul to the Corinthians: "Be on your guard, stand firm in the faith, be courageous, be strong." (1 Cor 16:13).

Moses was the liberator of Israel. David was the great king after God's own heart. Paul was the great apostle to the Gentiles. All of them were men of great courage. They acted in God's place. Knowing their work continued on after them, they exhorted God's people to always be courageous.

12 BE VIGILANT

"Be vigilant at all times"
(Luke 21:36a)

Jesus tells us to be vigilant as we await his second coming. But since we do not know when he will return, then we are to be vigilant at all times. To be vigilant is to be wide-awake, to be watchful, to be alert. "Therefore, stay awake! For you do not know on which day your Lord will come." (Mt 24:42).

Being vigilant

What constitutes vigilance?

First, vigilance is not just about being watchful but about being prepared when the end comes. To be prepared is to live a life of holiness and righteousness.

It is to live out the commandment of love and to avoid sin. "Above all, let your love for one another be intense, because love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Pt 4:8).

Second, vigilance is about being prayerful. “The end of all things is at hand. Therefore, be serious and sober for prayers.” (1 Pt 4:7). Prayer keeps us connected with God. Prayer keeps us focused on Jesus. Prayer enables us to be faithful to our calling. And since we do not know when Jesus will return, we have to pray without ceasing. We need the strength of God that comes through prayer.

We strive to live the Christian life until the end, when we make it to heaven. In the meantime, it will be difficult and challenging. We will be enticed by the world. We will be tempted by the devil. We will be wearied by our fallen flesh. And so Jesus exhorts us, “Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.” (Lk 21:36).

We also need to be mindful of the spiritual condition of others. We are our brothers’ keeper. We must not only want to make it to heaven, but to bring others with us as well. “To that end, be watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones” (Eph 6:18b). We watch out for ourselves, but we watch out for others as well.

Third, vigilance is about making use of the time profitably in the service of God. We do not just twiddle our thumbs while remaining watchful. Rather, we are to make use of the time before our Master’s return to utilize our talents for His Kingdom. Such is the parable of the talents, where a man went on a journey and entrusted his possessions to three servants, giving five talents to one, two to another, and one to the third (Mt 25:14-15). The first two doubled the money, and received the master’s reward. The third buried the money in the ground, and received the master’s condemnation. He had been watchful of the master’s return, but he was not vigilant.

One major use of our time is the work of evangelization. This is important because God wants all to be saved. We look not only to our own preparedness and ultimate salvation, but also to that of many others.

Fourth, vigilance is knowing that the enemy seeks to destroy us. “Be sober and vigilant. Your opponent the devil is prowling around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” (1 Pt 5:8). Even as we are in the Lord, we must never take our salvation for granted. The enemy never gives up. In fact, he puts greater effort in assaulting those who have been redeemed and are closest to God. “Therefore, whoever thinks he is standing secure should take care not to fall.” (1 Cor 10:12). We must never be overconfident.

Fifth, vigilance is about being joyfully expectant. When the end comes, that is the true beginning. Though there might be mighty disasters, it will not be disastrous, but rather wondrous. “But when these signs begin to happen,⁴² stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand.” (Lk 21:28). So be eager for the end.

⁴² Signs in the sun, the moon and the stars, with the powers of the heavens shaken (Lk 21:25-26).

Effects of vigilance

What are the positive effects of vigilance for our Christian lives?

One, we will be greatly impelled to live a life of holiness, always keeping our eyes and hearts focused on Jesus. In this we become more aware of our own weakness and being prone to sin. Thus we strive to be more prayerful, constantly asking for God's help. "Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." (Mt 26:41).

Two, we will be motivated to make good use of time, whatever is remaining of it. We can become more useful for the Kingdom. "Watch carefully then how you live, not as foolish persons but as wise, making the most of the opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not continue in ignorance, but try to understand what is the will of the Lord." (Eph 5:15-16).

Three, we will be prepared for the second coming of Jesus, and thereby have greater certainty that we will make it to eternal life in heaven.

"Behold, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who watches and keeps his clothes ready, so that he may not go naked and people see him exposed." (Rev 16:15).

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IV OUR INNER DISPOSITION

We must strive to grow in our relationship with God, be one in heart and mind with our brethren, and be God's instruments for the life of the world. We need to allow God to form us. We ourselves must cultivate certain virtues and disciplines by which we can grow in faith. God is always there for us. We just need to recognize this, and act accordingly.

Knowing who God is, knowing what He has done for us and will do for us, we must face every circumstance in life with certain virtues. There will be ups and downs, but God is constant and faithful. As such, there are practical things we must *always* be doing.

13 HOPE IN GOD

"I will always hope in you"
(Psalm 71:14a)

In the world, we distinguish between trust and hope. What is the difference? Trust is based on confidence and belief in one who is reliable and true, while hope is a desire or expectation for a particular thing or event. When we trust, we know with confidence, while when we hope, we wish for or desire. The key element is certainty. Trust is being certain, while hope is being optimistic. For example, when you lend something to someone, if you know the person is reliable, then you would trust that he would return it; but if you are not certain, then you hope he will return it.

It is helpful to know the distinction. However, in the case of God, since we relate to Someone in whom we trust, then hope is certain. Because we trust in Him, so we hope in Him.

We need to look at another difference, and that is between trust and faith. Oftentimes the two are looked on as the same, and used interchangeably. Both have the element of belief, but there is a difference. Trust is founded on what we know about the person or situation, while faith is not necessarily based on evidence or objective proof.⁴³ In fact, if there is objective proof of what we believe in, then that is no longer accepting in faith.

Putting the three words together, we have this reality: if we have faith, then we trust, and if we trust, then we hope.

Because we are a people of faith, we trust in God. With trust we then put our hope in Him. Since God is immutable and does not change, then we can always put our hope in Him. This is not wishful thinking. We trust in God's word, for "the word of our God stands forever." (Is 40:8b). Peter affirmed this truth as he said "the word of the Lord remains forever." (1 Pt 1:25a).

⁴³ For example, we do not see God but we have faith that God exists. Peter says about Jesus: "even though you do not see him now yet believe in him" (1 Pt 1:8b).

What do we hope for?

What do we as God's people trust in and hope for?

First is salvation. The word of God tells us that we have been saved by the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the most important for us. "My soul longs for your salvation; I put my hope in your word." (Ps 119:81).

Second is God's mercy. As we are sinners and we sin over and over again, we need God's mercy. God always extends His mercy to His people. As the psalmist says, "let Israel hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is mercy, with him is plenteous redemption" (Ps 130:7).

Third is God's perfect and loving plan for us. "For I know well the plans I have in mind for you—oracle of the Lord—plans for your welfare and not for woe, so as to give you a future of hope." (Jer 29:11). God does hold our lives in the palm of His hand. We are His beloved children, and He only wants what is best for us. We do experience woes in life, because we live in an imperfect and sinful world. But this is not God's plan. God wants to restore us to His original design, and that will ultimately happen in heaven.

Fourth is peace and joy. We do not have to accept God's ways grudgingly because of the difficulties involved. We do not have to trudge through life beaten and trodden down. We can have the best life ever, filled with the grace of God and empowered by the Holy Spirit. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the holy Spirit." (Rom 15:13).

How do we live out our hope?

If we are a people who hope in our God, that should radically transform our lives.

First, we can move forward in life with confidence. This is important when living in a world that is in darkness and evil, where our spiritual and familial well-being is under threat, where we are beset by bad news each and every day, with seemingly no respite in sight. But if God is with us, then we need not be afraid. "The Lord is near. Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:5b-7). The Lord is just a prayer away.

Second, we are led to deliberately enter more deeply into our life of faith. We realize that only God can see us through life, and ultimately bring us to our eternal home. But we could very well be lost while in this life. There are so many ways by which we can go astray. How must we act in life?

- * We fear God. We stand in awe of Him. We realize His utter greatness and our corresponding nothingness, but we look to His love and mercy. He still has taken hold of us, made us His children, and cares for us. That is awesome. "Rather the Lord takes pleasure in those who fear him, those who put their hope in his mercy." (Ps 147:11)

- * We remain in God's word, trusting fully in His promises. We must know that He is always there for us, through the ups and downs of life. Especially in times of trial and affliction. "Remember your word to your servant by which you give me hope. This is my comfort in affliction, your promise that gives me life." (Ps 119:49-50).
- * We always go back to God, as we many times will fail. We strive to remain faithful and give to God what is His due. "You must return to your God. Maintain loyalty and justice and always hope in your God." (Hos 12:7).

Hope not despair

There is one more thing. The opposite of hope is despair. Despair is the complete loss or absence of hope. When we despair, we give up on God and on His mercy. Peter and Judas both betrayed Jesus. But Peter repented, was forgiven and was restored to Jesus. Judas realized he did wrong, even repented, but could not accept that he could be restored to Jesus. So he took his own life.

When we hope in God, we are confident of who He is, and what He does for us, especially in our brokenness. "The righteous cry out, the Lord hears and he rescues them from all their afflictions. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, saves those whose spirit is crushed. Many are the troubles of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him from them all." (Ps 34:18-20). We need not be overwhelmed even in great affliction, even to the crushing of our spirit, because we have a God who delivers us.

Paul, who underwent much affliction and suffering in his ministry, echoed the same sentiment. "We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-9). When we undergo affliction, we are going the way of Christ. And we know that Jesus, who suffered the ultimate affliction of death, is victorious. Thus we are "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being given up to death for the sake of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh." (2 Cor 4:10-11). Looked on that way, we can never give in to despair.

We will never fall into despair but always put our hope in God as we look to and hold on to His promises. Here are just some of them.

- * "God is our refuge and our strength, and ever-present help in distress." (Ps 46:2).
- * "Then call on me on the day of distress; I will rescue you, and you shall honor me." (Ps 50:15).
- * "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the just run to it and are safe." (Prv 18:10).
- * "For I am the Lord, your God, who grasp your right hand; it is I who say to you, Do not fear, I will help you." (Is 41:13).
- * "My God will fully supply whatever you need, in accord with his glorious riches in Christ Jesus." (Phil 4:19).
- * "Cast all your worries upon him because he cares for you." (1 Pt 5:7).

As God is eternal, as “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8), as the Spirit of Jesus will be with us “always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:20b), then we indeed can always hope in God.⁴⁴ “Trust in the Lord forever! For the Lord is an eternal Rock.” (Is 26:4). “Israel, hope in the Lord, now and forever.” (Ps 131:3). Amen.

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14 GIVE THANKS

*“We always give thanks to God”
(Colossians 1:3a)*

God is so good to us. He created us, redeemed us, pours out His bountiful blessings upon us, and will bring us to heaven to live eternally with Him. What then is our appropriate and reasonable response? It is gratitude. And since God is *always* good to us, then we *always* give thanks to Him. We give “thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.” (Eph 5:20).

Giving thanks to our good God

What are the ways in which God is good to us, for which we give thanks?

First, God is merciful and just. This reality is written throughout the Bible.

- * “Give thanks to the Lord, who is good, whose love endures forever.” (1 Chr 16:34).
- * “I will thank the Lord in accordance with his justice” (Ps 7:18a).
- * “Give thanks to the Lord, who is good, whose mercy endures forever.” (Ps 106:1).
- * “Give thanks to the Lord for he is good, his mercy endures forever.” (Ps 107:1).
- * “Let them thank the Lord for his mercy, such wondrous deeds for the children of Adam.” (Ps 107:8).
- * “Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, his mercy endures forever.” (Ps 118:1,29).
- * “Praise the Lord, for he is good; for his mercy endures forever.” (Ps 136:1).
- * “Give thanks to the Lord of hosts, for the Lord is good; God’s love endures forever.” (Jer 33:11b).

Second, God has called us to Himself, and established us in our faith, giving us His very own Son Jesus. “So, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted in him and built upon him and established in the faith as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” (Col 2:6-7). Our faith has been our salvation. We have a personal relationship with the very Son of God. Jesus guides our path and establishes a strong foundation for our day-to-day lives. There is much to be thankful for.

⁴⁴ For further exposition on this subject, please read the book “A Future Full of Hope” by this same author.

Third, God pours out bountiful blessings upon us. David recognized such. “Riches and glory are from you, and you have dominion over all. In your hand are power and might; it is yours to give greatness and strength to all. Therefore, our God, we give you thanks and we praise the majesty of your name.” (1 Chr 29:12-13). The great and almighty Creator looks to puny mortals such as us and cares for us. James acknowledged that “all good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights” (Jas 1:17a). God is the source of all good.

Fourth, God gives us the privilege of entering into His holy presence. This is as we worship and pray. Imagine, a sinful creature like us entering into the presence of the Almighty God, our Creator!

Thus, whenever we pray, we give thanks. “Persevere in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Col 4:2). We give thanks for everything—for life, health, provisions, family, brethren, service, etc. We can even give thanks for the negative things that happen to us, as there are valuable lessons we learn. Most of all we thank God for redeeming us, “giving thanks to the Father, who has made (us) fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” (Col 1:12-14).

Our prayer includes our times of worship. Whenever we come into the holy presence of God, whether this is in the privacy of our prayer nook or a public celebration in the church, our hearts must be overflowing with thanks. What a privilege God gives us. “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name” (Ps 100:4).

Fifth, God gives us victory over death and sin. “But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:57). Jesus was victorious over death and sin. We share in that victory. By the power of God, we are able to overcome sin in our lives.

Jesus has set us free. “Consequently, you too must think of yourselves as being dead to sin and living for God in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 6:11). Paul says sin must not reign over us or to have any power over us. “But thanks be to God that, although you were once slaves to sin, you have become obedient from the heart to the pattern of teaching to which you were entrusted. Freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.” (Rom 6:17-18).

On our own, we could not have overcome sin and death. This is even for those who are striving to do good. “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want.” (Rom 7:19). Evil is persistent, demanding, overpowering. “So, then, I discover the principle that when I want to do right, evil is at hand.” (Rom 7:21). It is enough to drive one to frustration. “Miserable one that I am! Who will deliver me from this mortal body?” (Rom 7:24). Paul himself gives the answer. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Rom 7:25a).

Deepening our spiritual lives

In what ways does always giving thanks help in the deepening of our spiritual life?

First, it helps us appreciate other people, especially fellow Christians. As such, it helps us to love our neighbor as ourselves, which is a commandment of God.

We thank God for all the people He allows to come our way and impact on our lives.

- * Paul thanked God for the Corinthians: “I give thanks to my God always on your account for the grace of God bestowed on you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor 1:4). Paul made particular mention of the generosity of the Corinthians in helping the Macedonians when they were in need. He extolled them not only for their obedience to the gospel but in particular for “the generosity of your contribution to them and to all others” (2 Cor 9:13b). Paul exclaimed: “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!” (2 Cor 9:15).
- * Paul thanked God for Philemon, Apphia and Archippus: “I give thanks to my God always, remembering you in my prayers” (Phlm 1:4). Paul refers to Philemon as co-worker, to Apphia as sister, and to Archippus as fellow soldier. These refer to the three basic relationships we have with other Christians, that of brother (or sister), co-worker and comrade-in-arms. This arises out of our relationship with the Triune God, as son (or daughter) of the Father, servant of the Master, and soldier of the Spirit.⁴⁵
- * Paul thanked God for the Romans. At the end of Paul’s journey, when he and Luke arrived in Rome, the brothers came to meet them. “On seeing them, Paul gave thanks to God and took courage.” (Acts 28:15b). These people are our co-pilgrims and co-workers. They are our help, support and encouragement in the Christian life. We need them, and they need us.

Think about all the people, especially the brethren in Christ, who made a positive impact on your life. This would include even those who did you wrong, who by their actions made you grow deeper in your life of faith. Thank God for them and pray for them.

Second, it enables us to give thanks in all circumstances. “In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.” (1 Thes 5:18).

We do not give thanks only for what we consider the good that happens in our lives. In fact, there will be many times when bad things happen. But God, who is in control of everything, allows good and bad. He always has a purpose, often hidden from us. So in hope and trust, we are to be thankful, no matter what, for the good that God intends.

So this means thanking God even in the midst of trials and persecution. Indeed, the authentic gospel is the gospel of the cross, and the authentic disciple is one who embraces his cross daily. The cross is the only way to growing deeper in holiness and Christian perfection. Thus, when we are afflicted, this is God’s way of working in us to deepen our faith. Think about it: if no cross comes our way, we have nothing to embrace. Thus we thank God when they come, and even rejoice. “Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance, and let perseverance be perfect, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” (Jas 1:2-4).

⁴⁵ For further exposition on this, please read the book “Following Christ (The Call to Discipleship)” by this same author.

And so we must never be discouraged. God loves us and is at work in us. Those He loves He allows to be afflicted. “Therefore, we are not discouraged; rather, although our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” (2 Cor 4:16). Thanking God always allows us to have the right perspective. “For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal.” (2 Cor 4:17-18).

Since we give thanks in all circumstances, then we give thanks to God always. “And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” (Col 3:17).

Third, it gets us to focus not on ourselves but on God.

We focus not on our problems or trials or great difficulties. If we focus on these, we can get discouraged or even angry at God. But if we focus on God, what is there to complain about? And knowing that God is good and able to care for us well, we are rid of anxiety or negativity of every kind. What a peaceful and joyful life we can live!

Further, focusing on God makes us appreciate more His great qualities. Then, knowing that He freely pours out His grace upon us, knowing that we can be empowered by the Holy Spirit, we are encouraged to let God make something more of ourselves. As His people doing His work, we are destined for greatness.⁴⁶ We would never think as such if we were to just look at ourselves, with all our weaknesses and hang-ups. But focusing on God in His perfection and power, we know He can accomplish whatever He wants to in our lives. We have this realization: “I have the strength for everything through him who empowers me.” (Phil 4:13).

Fourth, it helps us appreciate what we have and not focus on what we do not have.

This results in a number of good things. For one, we can be content and not envious of others. We do not have to covet what others have that we do not. “Let your life be free from love of money but be content with what you have, for he has said, ‘I will never forsake you or abandon you.’” (Heb 13:5). This is not just about money, but about possessions, power, social standing, secular achievement, and so on.

For another, we need never be anxious. Jesus has said, “do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” (Mt 6:25a). Then after saying that the Father takes care of the birds in the sky and the wild flowers and the grass of the field, he says, “will he not much more provide for you, O you of little faith?” (Mt 6:30b).

His conclusion? “So do not worry” (Mt 6:31a). His assurance? “Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides.” (Mt 6:32b).

⁴⁶ For further exposition on this aspect of the Christian life, read the book “Greatness in Christ” by this same author.

We pray and ask God for what we need, knowing He is a generous and loving God. Having done that, we leave everything in His hands, with peace in our hearts. “Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil 4:6-7).

It is when we forget about God’s generosity that we begin to be afraid or discontent. The antidote then is giving thanks always.

Fifth, it helps prevent negativity from entering our lives.

When bad things happen to us, we can become negative. Negativity results in many harmful things, such as bitterness, self-pity, resentment. When this happens, our emotional distress translates into physical or physiological distress. We get sick.

The worse result of negativity is rebellion against God. This is what happened to Israel after God brought them out of their 400 years of slavery in Egypt.⁴⁷ When faced with adversity, they very quickly forgot the great things God did for them. This happened many times.

- * After the destruction of the Egyptian army at the Red Sea, they sang and rejoiced in triumph, but “after traveling for three days through the wilderness without finding water” (Ex 15:22b), “the people grumbled against Moses” (Ex 15:24a).
- * After spending some time at the oasis of Elim, coming into the wilderness of Sin, “the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (Ex 16:2).⁴⁸ They even expressed preference to just have died in Egypt!
- * After God provided them quail and manna, when they were encamped at Rephidim and there was no water, “they quarreled with Moses” (Ex 17:2a).⁴⁹
- * After God entered into covenant with Israel at Mount Sinai and gave Moses the Ten Commandments, they made a golden calf and offered sacrifice to it. They even credited it with what God had done for them. “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!” (Ex 32:8b).
- * After scouts reconnoitered the land of Canaan, when 10 of the 12 scouts gave a negative report, “the whole community broke out with loud cries, and the people wept into the night. All the Israelites grumbled against Moses and Aaron” (Nm 14:1-2a). They again expressed preference to have died in Egypt. When Moses tried to encourage them and told them not to rebel against the Lord, “the whole community threatened to stone them.” (Nm 14:10a).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The Lord had told Abram: “Know for certain that your descendants will reside as aliens in a land not their own, where they shall be enslaved and oppressed for four hundred years.” (Gn 15:13).

⁴⁸ Moses rightly said, “Your grumbling is not against us, but against the Lord.” (Ex 16:8b).

⁴⁹ Moses rightly said, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to a test?” (Ex 17:2b).

⁵⁰ The Lord said to Moses: “How long will this people spurn me? How long will they not trust me, despite all the signs I have performed among them?” (Nm 14:11).

Paul says about wicked people that “although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks.” (Rom 1:21a). They did not give him thanks! They became cold to God and turned against Him. They forgot all the good things He did for them. It would be downhill from thereon. “Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened. While claiming to be wise, they became fools” (Rom 1:21b-22).

So we should strive to not allow disappointment, bitterness, self-pity, negativity into our lives. We must be wary of these harmful emotions. We must not be a complaining people. We must not allow ingratitude to harden our hearts. But how can we avoid all those happenings that can cause these negative emotions? We cannot. But what we can do is to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, mindful of his great goodness, from which a grateful heart can develop. God allows bad things to happen to us, but there is always a good purpose. With Jesus there, we can have peace in our hearts in the midst of a very troubled world. “And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful.” (Col 3:15). There is the key. Be thankful. Always.

Sixth, it gives us the right perspective about God’s actions, which are often mysterious.

In the first place, God says, “I form the light, and create the darkness, I make weal⁵¹ and create woe; I, the Lord, do all these things.” (Is 45:7). God of course is good and not evil. He does not cause evil, but He does permit it. Oftentimes it is for the sake of a greater good. The greatest example is what God allowed to happen to His own Son Jesus. He was made to suffer greatly, but this resulted in our redemption.

Knowing this, we can gain a new perspective of why God allows bad things to happen to us. We may not know what the ultimate good outcome is, but we should know that we can trust in God. “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Rom 8:28). If God allows problems and challenges to come our way, He will help us through them. If God allows heavy burdens to afflict us, He will give us the strength to endure and overcome. As such, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom 8:39b).

So we give thanks to God always.

Seventh, it helps keep sin from our lives.

Giving thanks keeps us from sin? Yes. It keeps us focused on the goodness of God. As such, it makes us desire to please Him, to grow in Him, to live in love, to not offend him, to not commit sin.

Here is what Paul told the Ephesians: “Immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is fitting among holy ones, no obscenity or silly or suggestive talk, which is out of place, but instead, thanksgiving.” (Eph 5:3-4). We are to replace sin and inappropriate talk with thanksgiving!

⁵¹ “Weal” means well-being, prosperity, happiness.

So there you are. So many reasons to give thanks to God for. So many blessings that arise from having a heart that is grateful. In Jesus all is grace. “Everything indeed is for you, so that the grace bestowed in abundance on more and more people may cause the thanksgiving to overflow for the glory of God.” (2 Cor 4:15). Amen.

15 REJOICE

*“Rejoice in the Lord always.”
(Philippians 4:4a)*

God wants us to be happy in life. He originally created a perfect place in Eden for His creatures, where everything was provided for. Unfortunately, our first parents lost this paradise, and all generations after them had to be born in an imperfect and sinful world. And while there are indeed still many things in life that make us happy, there are also very many things in life that make us unhappy.

Now Paul tells us to rejoice always. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!” (Phil 4:4). It would seem that when Paul told people to rejoice always, they hesitated. How can this directive be? We rejoice if good things happen, but not when bad things happen. So Paul repeats it. He insists it is the right thing to do. No ifs, no buts. This is very challenging for us to live out.

Happiness and joy

We need to understand that there is a nuance between happiness and joy. Happiness is a human emotion, caused by good and positive things happening in life. On the other hand, joy is a fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁵² It is founded on our personal relationship with God and what we know of God’s goodness. A Christian can be unhappy or sad for the moment but should be always joyful.

What does it mean to rejoice always?

“Always” means in all circumstances. In life there will certainly be ups and downs, highs and lows, victories and defeats, health and illness, abundance and scarcity, joys and sorrows. Through all these, we remain joyful. This is possible because we are not focused on the circumstance, but on God.

There is nothing negative about God. If our lives are with God, knowing the great God of the universe cares for us and loves us, if we are rooted in Christ, knowing he gave his very life for us, then such is the cause of our joy.

⁵² Galatians 5:22.

Now being always joyful does not mean there will be no sadness coming out of trial, oppression, pain, disappointment, failure or betrayal that do happen in our life. On the contrary, there may be a lot of these. But we focus not on the persons or events that cause such, but we keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. He has never done anything to harm or displease us. In him is our joy.

Then, as we look to Jesus, we must understand that he only wants what is best for us, that he actually uses circumstances of life, *often the painful ones*, to form us and deepen our faith. After all, that was the path of the Father for him. “For the sake of the joy that lay before him he endured the cross, despising its shame, and has taken his seat at the right of the throne of God.” (Heb 12:2b).

So we keep “our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” (Heb 12:2a). Our Lord gave us an example, to help us go through the tribulations of life. “Consider how he endured such opposition from sinners, in order that you may not grow weary and lose heart.” (Heb 12:3).

So it is all for our good. We can even say that the greater the cause for grief, the greater the work of God in our lives. “Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy.” (Jn 16:20).

What greater grief could there be than the passion of Jesus our Lord? But even as Jesus dreaded what was to come, even asking the Father to let the cup pass him by, he was already looking beyond the pain and ignominy. At the last supper before his arrest, Jesus prayed to the Father, “But now I am coming to you.

I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely.” (Jn 17:13). This made an impact on the apostles. Later it was their turn. They were flogged for speaking in the name of Jesus. But “they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.” (Acts 5:41).

So understand that grief and joy can come together. For example, when a loved one dies, we grieve, and it is right to do so. But we also rejoice, because death is just the gateway to eternal life. On the outside we will cry, but on the inside we can smile.

To rejoice always is not to deny pain or sorrow. But it is all about faith and not feelings. Joy is not just having a cheerful disposition, but looking to the reality of being in Christ. We may feel bad for the negative thing that has happened, but we must feel good that God is working to achieve His purpose. As both bad and good happen in life, we must know that grief and joy can come together. Our posture and action need not be conflicted.

As the people of God, we can be “sorrowful yet always rejoicing” (2 Cor 6:10a). This is the seeming contradiction, but it is not. It is the essence of the authentic Christian life. We rejoice always, “through glory and dishonor, insult and praise. We are treated as deceivers and yet are truthful; as unrecognized and yet acknowledged; as dying and behold we live” (2 Cor 6:8-9a).

Reasons for our joy

So what are the reasons for our joy? There are very many, but here are some basic ones.

First and most basic, we rejoice for being in Christ.

Jesus is always there for us. He loves and cares for us, shows us the way, showers us with grace, empowers us by his Spirit.

- * He anoints us and strengthens us, enabling us to grow in holiness and maturity. “Rejoice, you righteous, in the Lord” (Ps 33:1a).
- * In him we are secure, especially in times of trouble. “The righteous rejoices and takes refuge in the Lord” (Ps 64:11a).
- * In him we are saved. “God indeed is my salvation; I am confident and unafraid. For the Lord is my strength and my might, and he has been my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the fountains of salvation.” (Is 12:2-3).⁵³
- * With him we have fellowship. “For our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete.” (1 Jn 1:3c-4).

Second, we rejoice for the life given us by God, by which we can live according to His will.

Every waking day is cause for joy, as we look to how God can be glorified in our lives by the things we will say and do. “This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice in it and be glad.” (Ps 118:24). Never again should there be a new day where we are reluctant to get up and to face what may come.

Third, we rejoice in being in the community of God’s people.

The Christian community is our larger family, where we have our beloved brethren in Christ, with whom we all together express love and give support. We must be eager to be with them and to serve with them.

- * It is a joy to see our brethren standing firm in Christ. “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, beloved.” (Phil 4:1).
- * It is a joy to work together for the propagation of the gospel. “I give thanks to my God at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership for the gospel from the first day until now.” (Phil 1:3-5).
- * Our ultimate joy is when we all together make it to heaven. “For what is our hope or joy or crown to boast of in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming if not you yourselves? For you are our glory and joy.” (1 Thes 2:19-20).

⁵³ God reciprocates our joy. As we rejoice in Him, He rejoices in us. “The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty savior, who will rejoice over you with gladness, and renew you in his love, who will sing joyfully because of you” (Zep 3:17).

Fourth, we rejoice in the work of evangelization.

Evangelization is our basic work. Our Church is a missionary Church. She exists for mission. Evangelization is at the very core of our existence and purpose in life. It is a participation in God's work of salvation. In fact, God has made Himself dependent upon us His people for His salvation to be proclaimed.

This is even as there are those who do Christian work with impure motives and a selfish agenda. Paul said that "some preach Christ from envy and rivalry, others from good will." (Phil 1:15).

But his posture is still positive: "What difference does it make, as long as in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is being proclaimed? And in that I rejoice. Indeed I shall continue to rejoice" (Phil 1:18).

Fifth, we rejoice for the privilege of serving God.

We are all servants of our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ. How awesome is it that we serve the King of kings and Lord of lords?! How amazing is it that we do divine work? Such service then is cause for great joy. "Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful song." (Ps 100:2).

We live to know, love and serve God. And knowing that God is about a mighty work in the world, it is our great privilege to be used by him. Imagine weak and sinful people doing divine work!

Sixth, we rejoice in God's protection.

We are children protected by the Father, a people protected by the Son, soldiers protected by the Spirit. "Then all who trust in you will be glad and forever shout for joy. You will protect them and those will rejoice in you who love your name." (Ps 5:12). How amazing is it that God Himself is our protector?

Seventh, we rejoice in the privilege of participating in the suffering of Christ.

If we live out our faith, there will be oppression, persecution and trial by fire. But in the end, we will share in the glory of God. "But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed you may also rejoice exultantly." (1 Pt 4:13).

With joy in our hearts, there is nothing in life that can ever bring us down. Even with very negative things happening all around us, we can have a positive outlook in life.

We can simply continue to move forward, knowing the right and reasonable posture: "Rejoice always." (1 Thes 5:16).

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CONCLUSION

We are called to be 24/7 for Jesus. That is not some nebulous undertaking, but as we have seen, something very practical. It is comprised of doing things on a day-to-day basis. It has to do with our ongoing relationship with God, with others, and with the world.

Now the God who calls us to do all these things is a God whom we can truly count on. As He is constant and unchanging, He too does certain things all the time, always for our good.

First, God will always be with us. Jesus came into this world to win for us our salvation. Having done that, he has returned to heaven, where he awaits us. In the meantime, we live in a valley of tears, with incessant assaults from the evil one and from a world dominated by him. Our making it to our eternal home is always under threat. But Jesus has not left us to our own devices. He promised to be always with us. "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Mt 28:20b). Jesus sent us his very own Spirit, who accompanies us and sanctifies us.

Second, in the face of great evil in the world and the weakness of our flesh, we can only make it with God's help. But God does want us to be saved. God will not withhold whatever we need. "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumph in Christ and manifests through us the odor of the knowledge of him in every place." (2 Cor 2:14). We can be like Christ. We can live Christ. We can be a truly redeemed people. "For we are the aroma of Christ for God among those who are being saved" (2 Cor 2:15a).

Third, God promises to provide for our needs, with some left over so that we can also provide for the needs of others. "Moreover, God is able to make every grace abundant for you, so that in all things, always having all you need, you may have an abundance for every good work." (2 Cor 9:8). Remember that in the first Christian community after Pentecost, no one among the faithful was in need, because they shared whatever they had. We can be confident that God will always provide for our needs. We need never worry. We can focus on the work given to us in the world.

Fourth, God assures us that we will live forever with him in the New Jerusalem. "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them as their God." (Rev 21:3). What a great assurance. This certainly helps us endure and persevere. We do have something great to look forward to. Whatever pain and suffering there has been will no longer be. "He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, for the old order has passed away." (Rev 21:4).

Then we will be with God eternally in heaven. Always and forever. Amen.

APPENDIX A JUSTICE VERSUS RIGHTEOUSNESS

Lest you be misled by the title to this paper, there is no conflict or contradiction between justice and righteousness. On the contrary, the two words as found in the scriptures are often interchangeable.

Consider two different translations of the Bible:⁵⁴

Book of Job

NAB: “Does it please the Almighty that you are just?” (Jb 22:3a)

RSV: “Is it any pleasure to the Almighty if you are righteous”

NAB: “and your justice, only a fellow human being.” (Jb 35:8)

RSV: “and your righteousness a son of man.”

NAB: “abundant in justice, who never oppresses.” (Jb 37:23c)

RSV: “and abundant righteousness he will not violate.”

Psalms

NAB: “It is he who judges the world with justice” (Ps 9:9a)

RSV: “and he judges the world with righteousness” (Ps 9:8a).⁵⁵

NAB: “For you upheld my right and my cause, seated on your throne, judging justly.” (Ps 9:5).

RSV: “For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment.” (Ps 9:4).

NAB: “Then my tongue shall recount your justice” (Ps 35:28a)

RSV: “Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness”

NAB: “Your justice is like the highest mountains” (Ps 36:7a)

RSV: “Your righteousness is like the mountains of God” (Ps 36:6a)

NAB: “You love justice and hate wrongdoing” (Ps 45:8a)

RSV: “you love righteousness and hate wickedness.” (Ps 45:7a)

⁵⁴ The New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE) and the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV) are two of the most preferred Catholic Bible translations.

⁵⁵ The RSV translation of the psalms is a verse number behind the NAB because it does not count the superscription as a verse. The superscription is from pre-Christian Jewish tradition. It may contain a quick description of the setting of the psalm (e.g., see Ps 3:1) or technical liturgical terms (e.g., Ps 9:1; this probably refers to the melodic accompaniment for the psalm).

NAB: "In your justice rescue and deliver me" (Ps 71:2a)
 RSV: "In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me"⁵⁶

The prophets

NAB: "They will be called oaks of justice" (Is 61:3c)
 RSV: "that they may be called oaks of righteousness"

NAB: "This is the name to be given him: 'The Lord our justice.'" (Jer 23:6b)
 RSV: "And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'"

NAB: "To the Lord our God belongs justice" (Bar 1:15a)
 RSV: "Righteousness belongs to the Lord our God"

NAB: "Justice, O Lord, is on your side" (Dn 9:7a)
 RSV: "To you, O Lord, belongs righteousness"

NAB: "Sow for yourselves justice" (Hos 10:12a)
 RSV: "Sow for yourselves righteousness"

NAB: "Seek justice, seek humility" (Zep 2:3b)
 RSV: "seek righteousness, seek humility"

NAB: "and I will be their God, in faithfulness and justice." (Zec 8:8b)
 RSV: "and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness."

NAB: "But for you who fear my name, the sun of justice will arise" (Mal 3:20a)
 RSV: "But for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise" (Mal 4:2a)⁵⁷

New Testament⁵⁸

NAB: "But if our wickedness provides proof of God's righteousness, what can we say?" (Rom 3:5a).
 RSV: "But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say?"

NAB: "You loved justice and hated wickedness" (Heb 1:9a)
 RSV: "You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness"

⁵⁶ There are more examples in the psalms, but let these suffice.

⁵⁷ RSV has a chapter 4, which is part of chapter 3 for NAB.

⁵⁸ The New American Bible itself used "justice" in many parts of its original New Testament translation (1970), and then used "righteousness" in its revised translation (1986). We see this in very many instances. Just to name some: Rom 1:17, 3:21,25,26, 4:3,5,6,9,11,13,22, 6:13,16,18,19,20, 8:10, 9:30,31, 10:3,5,6, 14:17; 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Cor 9:9, 11:15; Gal 3:6,21; Eph 4:24, 5:9, 6:14; Phil 1:11, 3:6,9; Heb 7:2, 11:7, 12:11; Jas 1:20, 2:23, 3:18; 1 Pt 3:14; 2 Pt 3:13.

APPENDIX B INJUSTICE AND THE UNRIGHTEOUS

God loves us, and He wants the best for us. God created the universe that is good. God intended for all of us to dwell with Him eternally in paradise. God is all powerful and He can do what He wants to do.

Why then do bad things happen to people? Why do good people suffer, like Job?

Well, for one thing, we have free will. God is all good, but we are not, and many times we choose to do what is wrong. This gets us into all sorts of trouble. Second, there is evil in the world, which affects us whether we like it or not. But why does God not protect those He loves? Well, God is all powerful and in control, but chooses not to control our lives. Out of love He does not violate our free will. He does try to guide us, and at times He intervenes, but basically we choose our own path.

Why do bad things happen to good people? There are many reasons.

- * Spiritual warfare. Satan opposes whatever is of God and whoever is for God. This is what happened to Job.
- * Discipline. We are children of God and so He disciplines us as a father does to a son. This is for our own good, to bring us back to the right path.
- * Testing. God allows affliction and suffering to see if we are with Him only because of the rewards and blessings. This is what Satan claimed about Job. When our consolation is removed, are we still there for God? It is a test of faithfulness.
- * Purification. We are called to holiness, and suffering is a fire that purifies, that burns out the imperfections in us.
- * Redemption. The way of salvation is the way of the cross. This is Jesus' own way. Through suffering we help redeem ourselves and others.⁵⁹
- * Faith. Affliction and suffering deepen our faith like no other. When we are at our lowest point, when God seems to be nowhere, when we are helpless and have no more hope, and as we grapple with our condition that seemingly is unjust, there we enter into the gateway of a much deeper relationship with God. This is what happened to Job.

⁵⁹ Jesus of course is the one Redeemer, but we participate in his work of redemption—by working to transform our lives and grow in holiness, by evangelizing others, by intercession, by our work for social justice, and so on.

Fine. God loves us, and suffering makes us better persons. Further, after the discipline, testing and purification, we look to blessings. Indeed, Job was restored and his blessings returned twofold.

So bad things happen to good people. But why do bad things not happen to bad people?⁶⁰ Why in fact do the unrighteous thrive? Job was dismayed. “Why do the wicked survive, grow old, become mighty in power?” (Job 21:7). The good suffer, while the bad flourish. Is this not injustice?

This is the mystery of evil in the world. In the face of a just and righteous God who is all-powerful, why does God allow this seemingly unjust situation? This was part of Job’s struggle.

Like Job and his friends, we have human thinking. God did not even try to answer Job’s questions, but simply pointed to who He was. God was not being autocratic, not just demanding unquestioning obedience, not being stubbornly unreasonable. Rather, God wanted to bring Job to a much higher plane. It was not enough that Job’s human questions would be answered. God wanted to reveal Himself, and His frame of reference would be not man but God.

If God were to bring us to a higher plane in our relationship with Him, just as He did to Job, then we can begin to appreciate why the good suffer. As was said, affliction and suffering deepen our faith.⁶¹

Are we good simply because of the blessings? What if the blessings are withdrawn, as in the case of Job? Do we pray because we get what we ask for? What if God says no or does not respond at all; will we still persevere in prayer? Do we serve and give of ourselves sacrificially because we have the consolation of God and the approval of man? What if those we serve fail to appreciate us, or worse, even turn against us and malign us? Do we give of our time, talent and treasure because we look to God’s reward? What if we see those who do not give as much still being blessed by God, even more than our blessings?⁶²

God wants us to love and serve Him for His sake alone. Not for rewards. Not for material blessings. Not for recognition. Not because we fear punishment. Not in order to make it to heaven. In this, the ultimate test might precisely be that the unrighteous thrive! Will we still continue to do good, even when it is seemingly unjust?⁶³ So God allows the unrighteous to thrive, *for our sake!* So that we, like Job, might enter more deeply in our relationship with Him, and know Him for who He truly is.

⁶⁰ A lot of bad things of course happen to bad people. But there are also so many others who seem to live a nice fulfilled life.

⁶¹ There are unfortunately also those who, when afflicted and as they consider the injustice in their situation, turn away from God, rather than being drawn more deeply to Him.

⁶² Or worse, they are blessed while we suffer.

⁶³ In this many have fallen and simply joined the company of the wicked, or at least, no longer persevered in growing in holiness.

Oh, the inscrutable depth of the love of God for us!

The book of Job could have ended without the Epilogue (Job 42:7-17). In a way, the restoration of Job could detract from the very lesson God wants to teach, because it still makes us look to eventual reward and blessings. Perhaps the human writer, painfully aware of the human condition, felt he needed to give this final consolation and basis for hope.

Indeed, in this world the good might suffer and the bad thrive. We might experience this injustice for the duration of our life on earth. But ultimately, in what really counts, the good can look to redemption and eternal life in heaven. This is the ultimate justice for the righteous.

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We are called to holiness and discipleship. These do not just happen. They require the grace of God, the power of the Spirit, and our own effort.

God does tell us what we need to do. We for our part obey, and live out God's ways with consistency, persistence and discipline.

We do these not just some of time, but all of the time. Always. We are to be 24/7 for Jesus.

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