

The Narrow Gate

**Belief – Repentance – Obedience –
Discipleship**

Rob Kimble

The Narrow Gate

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Preface

The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule by their [own] power;
And My people love [to have it] so.
But what will you do in the end?
- Jeremiah 5:31 (NKJV)

This book is about truth — its power to save when maintained and the devastation that follows when it is compromised.

In 2020, COVID-19 changed the world...

Before the pandemic shook up the world and my home with it, I had no interest in medical matters. In my home, I am involved with all major decisions across all subjects and issues. The sole exception is anything medical. I lack sufficient understanding, experience, and curiosity with anything related to sickness, cuts, bruises, broken bones, etc. to pursue details or take decisive action. When anyone in my house is sick, I want someone else to take charge and make the decisions.

On one particular evening, I was home when my daughter's fever rose to 103 degrees. My wife was working late, and with no one else in the home to make a decision, I did the most reasonable thing to do for someone who isn't equipped to handle anything remotely related to a medical emergency. I packed up my daughter and headed to the

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hospital. On the way to the hospital, I called my wife to let her know what was happening. She convinced me to meet her on the side of the road. She took our daughter home and successfully reduced her fever. I felt a huge relief knowing my wife would take care of McKenzie, and I rested in the peace that our daughter was in more capable hands.

Fast-forward to 2020 — COVID-19 presented a completely different situation. I felt the urgency of life and death decisions needing to be made regarding this potential epidemic crisis rapidly sweeping across the world. I became obsessed with the obligation to protect my family and started consuming news, paying particular attention as the effects of the virus manifested in other countries before arriving in the United States. I remember feeling frustrated by the absence of any real guidance from the medical community on what we should expect and how we should prepare as the threat drew closer and became more real.

I asked God to tell me what I should do and how I should lead my family. I heard a response in my spirit which I didn't fully understand at the time. I believe I heard God tell me the following three things:

1. The disease is not the enemy, fear is.
2. Seek truth.
3. Watch Israel.

The meaning behind the first item on this list was immediately observable. I watched people become distressingly deliberate, even obsessive, nervously performing the simplest of routine tasks. Touching a doorknob, pumping gas, opening mail, handling grocery items, even having a conversation with another person —

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all became ritualized with gratuitous steps to guard against the virus. Fear was a palpable presence everywhere. The alarm, trepidation, and apprehension I saw in each and every person I came in contact with made me aware of how unique the peace I possessed was. I recognized this rare, stabilizing calm I was experiencing came from God in response to my prayer.

I did not readily understand what God meant with the second and third items or how they might provide clarity in my situation, but I went forward with an expectation of further understanding. God put truth on my radar regarding COVID-19, and I was prepared to seek whatever that truth might be. I can honestly say I was shocked at the extent of deceit orchestrated in this country by every single institution which had a fiduciary responsibility to protect the people they were created to serve. Government, media, and healthcare institutions — formed to protect our rights, our access to true information, and our health and welfare all turned on the ones they existed to serve.

Our governmental institutions aligned to conceal and alter what we could know and discover, and the media happily aided in the subterfuge. The essential role of a journalist is to act as a watchdog to those with power in all its forms by investigating and reporting on the actions of governments and institutions, holding them accountable to the public. Not only did mainstream media outlets fail to hold these institutions accountable, they went out of their way to mislead, redirect, and subvert any earnest attempts to discover the truth of what had taken place and what yet

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needed to be done. They turned their substantial power and influence toward tearing down those who asked questions about official statements, offered alternate explanations or solutions, or presented evidence counter to the official version of events. They used accusation and ridicule to shape the narrative, making detractors seem ridiculous, petty, or evil. Instead of seeking the truth no matter the source, news outlets facilitated lies and propaganda.

The healthcare industry, which should have been dedicated to treating illness and easing pain, chose instead to exploit the fear produced by the global pandemic to the tune of trillions of dollars. Hospitals, clinics, pharmacies, and many other medical facilities and organizations received an influx of cash with the arrival COVID-19 and its required response, and in certain instances, compromised all integrity to increase their share of that cash. Suddenly, people weren't dying of the flu or pneumonia anymore. It was more profitable for healthcare providers when someone died of COVID. If a patient died with COVID, he died of COVID. Everyone died from COVID.

Relatively soon after the effects of the pandemic began to take shape, institutions all over the world rallied around the COVID-19 vaccine. It became a clarion call of world-wide salvation.

If you take the vaccine, you will live.

This message was proclaimed from every corner of the map, approved through all the highest halls of government and industry, and amplified by every

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mainstream media channel. No part of the world escaped the pronouncement that COVID-19 had one treatment — the VACCINE.

Pharmaceutical companies pushed to manufacture the vaccine, each company with its own proprietary, and very expensive, variant. Governments around the globe paid for the immunization of their citizens. Mainstream media told everyone to run out and get the vaccine without delay.

The vaccine was labeled the only acceptable option to treat COVID-19 for the general population, and the political, media, and medical institutions united to protect their common interests at all costs. A report of success with any other therapy option in treating COVID-19 symptoms was viewed as a significant threat requiring immediate eradication. News and media outlets maligned the characters of whistleblower health care professionals, while regulatory bodies weaponized the medical licensing boards, schools, and medical institutions threatening the livelihoods of well-meaning physicians and scientists who challenged the official narrative. If they dared attempt to break through censorship efforts, all the institutional powers rose up to silence them.

Social media platforms, built on the idea of the free flow of information, became instruments of suppression. Any person expressing thoughts or ideas at odds with the accepted story was targeted, and their ideas were moderated, de-prioritized, ridiculed, de-bunked, shadow-banned, or outright removed from platforms.

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Communication became about what couldn't be said rather than what must be said. It didn't matter how truthful the messenger, important the message, or ferocious the fight to spread it: it was almost impossible to hear anything when truth was forced to whisper while lies were encouraged to shout.

Then, Israel released statistical data proving the COVID-19 vaccine did not prevent people from getting the virus. This caused a great pause in the momentum of vaccine sales. In an attempt to keep this information from further eroding the trust and support of the vaccine among the general public, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) changed their longstanding definition of a vaccine so as to dampen any damaging effect of the Israeli reports revealing that the COVID-19 vaccine was not a true vaccine. Their efforts proved insufficient to regain momentum of vaccine sales.

When the powers that be failed to convince, they attempted to compel. Political leaders, including the President of the United States, attempted to mandate that everybody in the USA had to get a shot under threat of losing their jobs.

Layer upon layer, the story of the COVID-19 pandemic was filtered, spun, twisted, and re-framed beyond all recognition. Eventually, we came to understand the truth. They lied. It became evident to anyone paying attention that every voice permitted to speak freely about COVID-19 was lying.

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Serious consequences affected hundreds of millions of people around the world because truth was subverted by many of our esteemed institutions. Mission integrity in our institutions was severely altered because people of authority valued wealth, career, ambition, and power over established, stated objectives. Truth was compromised or completely abandoned for the sake of structural power to be captured and held.

Consequently, millions of people died during the COVID-19 pandemic. My father was one of them. He — and each one of those millions of people — needed real help. They needed politicians to act truthfully on behalf of their constituents, focusing on their health and safety concerns instead of prostituting themselves to the pharmaceutical industry lobbyists or the Washington political power brokers. They needed news and media institutions to serve the public by doing thorough investigations, exposing the corruption, challenging corporate pressures, and giving voice to truth instead of compromising their character by becoming tools of propagandists. They needed medical institutions to abide by their ethical standards in serving the health concerns of their patients and the population in general by diligently seeking all possible options to treat and heal the sick instead of capitulating to the massive pharmaceutical industry leaders.

Many people needlessly suffered or died because truth was abandoned for hidden agendas. I believe there is a very clear parallel between the failures of our governmental, medical, and media institutions during the

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events of the pandemic and what is going on right now within the institution of the church in general. Just as those non-church institutions discarded or obfuscated truth in order to facilitate a purpose contrary to their stated objectives, the institution of church has followed the same pattern. There is an epidemic of truth being neglected or discarded in the church. As impactful as COVID-19 and its fallout was, the impact of broken trust in the church at large is greater, reaching out to affect billions of people over hundreds of years with ramifications stretching into eternity.

It is essential for God's people to look truthfully at how we represent God's Word and His kingdom. Church is not a denomination, an organization, or your pastor. Church is God's people being led by Jesus (the Truth) on behalf of the kingdom of God. The sole focus of the church should be wholly based on the pursuit of God's kingdom under the direction of Jesus and not on individual objectives. The church should prioritize sharing God's Word accurately and discipling each individual by "teaching them to observe all" that Jesus "commanded" (Matthew 28:20).

Before we can examine how things have gone awry, we must first admit that it is possible. We must recognize that our beloved institution of church is just as susceptible to the tainted mission change by individuals just as with the worldly organizations. Jesus spoke and warned often about religious leaders who compromised God's will for personal ulterior motives.

This book challenges a number of long standing traditions and doctrines taught within institutional churches

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by comparing those traditions and doctrines with Scripture to see if they are true. Within these pages, we will explore what the Bible says about several key issues which plague God's people today. We will weigh truths gleaned from numerous passages of Scripture against the false doctrines and traditions of established religion being taught from pulpits.

I wholeheartedly believe that if you are prepared to seek truth, this book will help you discover divine, eternal truths which have been obscured and camouflaged by false religious teachings. In addition, I pray this book will help you encounter a deeper relationship with your Father in heaven and equip you to help others do the same.

A true witness delivers souls,
But a deceitful [witness] speaks lies.
- Proverbs 14:25 (NKJV)

GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES

1

Church Members?

Go Therefore and Make ~~Disciples~~

Have you ever noticed a large successful business whose service or product deteriorated soon after the company became publicly traded? Say a delivery service that was once known for its dependability and customer service now frequently leaves your packages out in the rain and directs all your complaints into an automated answering service loop with no ability to talk to anyone who cares about you. Maybe a pizza company that once won your business with fresh ingredients and generous toppings, but now their pizza is barely preferable over the frozen variety. The reason for this is the company mission changed.

When the company was privately owned, its mission was to provide you, the customer, with a better product or service than their competitors provided in order to win your business and generate revenue. Once the company went public, the mission changed to a cost-cutting (quality sacrificing) endeavor to increase profit in order to drive up stock share valuations for the shareholders. Over an extended period of time, the company will lose its market dominance to another brand and be destined for absorption by a competitor, or dwindle in relevancy until bankruptcy.

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Why am I leading off this book talking about the ill effects of mission change? Because I believe that the modern church is well into the after effects of a serious, errant, and consequential mission change. We have, long ago, changed the commission which Jesus gave us of making *disciples* (Matt. 28:19, 20) into making *church members*.

Church growth, instead of spiritual growth, became the overarching mission of many churches in America. The priority of gaining numbers has supplanted discipling. Though some might claim their motivation was to increase outreach to the sinful world, compromises of God's Word and His mission were made nonetheless.

In order to increase church membership, services were tailored toward the goal of growing numbers of people. Since most people do not like to feel convicted by their sins, messages were designed accordingly to be uplifting and to make people feel good when they attended. Consequently, the harder topics of sin, repentance, judgement, and damnation are avoided altogether.

These narrowed messages predominantly focus on how much God loves them and the gift of salvation from Jesus' sacrifice of sins. Meanwhile, sermons about God's hatred of evil, intolerance of idols, and His requirement of repenting for their sins and changing of their ways are left untaught. What started as a means to bring in new people has morphed into wrong and corrupt doctrine. Eventually, whole congregations began passing down error of doctrine to the following generation stemming from a lack of complete teaching of the Bible.

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Moses warned not to suppress God's Word:

Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, **neither shall ye diminish [ought] from it**, [EMPHASIS MINE] that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.

– Deuteronomy 4:2 (KJV)

In society, most of the population are oblivious to the fact that they are being manipulated by governments through their abilities to determine what information one receives, or does not receive through information mediums such as network news channels, social media sites, and web searches. For example, people who watch news programs from networks controlled by a political party will not be made aware of many problems, corruptness, and hypocrisy from within that favored political party simply through an editorial process of choosing not to cover certain stories. The political powers that be *diminish* the detrimental effects of the negative actions done within that preferred political party by not informing their followers of critical news about it. The same subtle tactic works inside the church as well. If you never preach about the need to stop sinning, a large segment of the congregation won't feel the need to stop.

The word "that" is commonly referred to as a purpose word, because a purpose is frequently communicated following it. In the case of Deuteronomy 4:2, the reason we should not add, *nor diminish*, God's Word is for the purpose — "that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God." Consequently, when God's Word is

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editorially *diminished* for the purpose of making people feel good, it causes people to misunderstand and disobey God.

Paul was quite concerned with consequences stemming from *diminishing* the Word of God. He felt personally liable to God for any person who might end up in hell should he not proclaim all of God's word:

Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I [am]
pure from the blood of all [men].

For I have not shunned to declare unto you **all the
counsel of God** [EMPHASIS MINE].

– Acts 20:26, 27 (KJV)

Over time, success for the new mission (more members, increase of offerings, new buildings, additional staff members) numbed the conscience of those who orchestrated the compromises. Some compromise bred more compromise. More and more hard Scriptures were avoided or watered down.

The mission change has serious consequences that you should be very aware of. Churches are trapping many people into a deception in which they think they are saved, when in reality, they are not. Read carefully what Jesus tells us about those who are surprised to learn that they will not be granted entrance into heaven:

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in

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your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'

And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

– Matthew 7:21-23

Notice that *many* people who thought they were saved were in fact quite deceived. This suggests that a large number of supposed Christians, if not the majority of people who claim Jesus is Lord, will be appalled to discover that they will spend an eternity in hell. Somehow, *many* people knew who Jesus was, did church related works, had an expectation of being saved, but were not.

These people were not the unchurched, but were people who claimed that Jesus was their “Lord.” Which large segment of society calls Jesus “Lord?” The church. They cast out devils in the name of Jesus, prophesied in the name of Jesus, and did charitable works in the name of Jesus. These people described would be highly respected in the modern church and would be thought to be very spiritual. Yet, Jesus says to them, “I never knew you” and casts them out into eternal damnation (Luke 13:27, 28).

Jesus reveals what standard is needed for people to go into the kingdom of heaven. He says, “but the one who does the will of my Father” is the one that will enter. What is the Father’s will that people need to do, and are we sharing that information with those whom we are ministering unto?

At a minimum, repentance of sins is one thing clearly indicated as the will of God that the believer must do:

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The Lord is not slack concerning [His] promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

– 2 Peter 3:9 (NKJV)

God doesn't want any human being to die spiritually, but His justice demands payment for sin. Repentance is the action (what one "does") in response to belief in Jesus, which God requires in exchange for the imputing of His righteousness. This will be discussed further in Chapter 8.

Inviting people to Jesus without sharing with them the necessity of repenting of their sins is a growing issue in the church. I have had the opportunity to visit several churches spread across a variety of denominations, and I have heard countless invitations that offer Jesus without repentance. Belief in Jesus without any action of change in one's life is an example of what James calls *dead faith* (James 2:17, 26). James goes on to say that "faith apart from works (action) is useless" (James 2:20).

With the mission change from God's will of discipling people, to man's will of making more church members, a diversion of paths was created. In the former case, there is a path where one sacrifices self, takes up a new life in Jesus Christ, seeks to know and do God's will daily, and pursues to lead others in the same. In the latter case, there is a path in which one professes a belief in Jesus, but makes no or little significant change in their life.

Jesus spoke about two gates that have diverging paths leading to two different destinations:

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Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

– Matthew 7:13, 14

Again, Jesus is talking to whom we would refer to as the church, not the unchurched. He's not contrasting the way of the world against the way of church. He's contrasting His true way to life (the narrow gate) versus an untrue representation of God's way (the wide gate), which leads to destruction (hell).

In the very next verse (v. 15), Jesus warns about false prophets. A prophet is a person who speaks on behalf of God to the people. A false prophet speaks untruthfully of God to the people. A pastor, preacher, teacher, or church leader who changes God's Word, standards, or commandments is a false prophet.

LAODICIA

If you or someone in your family is ill, you most likely make an appointment to visit your family doctor. Initially, the nurse gathers a series of vital signs such as body temperature, blood pressure, pulse rate, and breathing rate to aid in the doctor's analysis. The doctor interviews and examines the patient to identify specific symptoms such as pains, dizziness, coughing, etc. Once the doctor determines

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a diagnosis, he or she prescribes a treatment to treat the patient.

Revelation 2 and 3 are similar to a family doctor visit for seven different churches with our physician, Jesus. In these two chapters, Jesus examines these churches, issues His diagnosis, and prescribes a remedy. Jesus tells the church what vital signs are healthy (what they are doing that is good) and what vital signs indicate something is wrong (what they are doing as a church that needs immediate correction). Jesus then prescribes His remedy to each church that received a bad diagnosis and gives them a hope of healing (if they do what He prescribes).

There are two relevant points to each of us that I want to highlight. First, Jesus says in each letter, "...let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Notice that all the churches are instructed to hear what the Holy Spirit says about each specific church. This means that your church and my church should compare the same vital signs expressed in each letter with our churches. If we have the same symptoms, we should follow the same prescription (corrective action) that Jesus gave to that specific church.

Secondly, Jesus' instruction to hear what the Spirit says is also directed to the individual. Jesus says "he who has an ear" should listen to what the Spirit says. You and I each have an ear, which means you and I, individually, have been instructed by Jesus to hear what the Holy Spirit said to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. The diagnosis and prescription for each of the seven churches applies to each of us individually, as well as the body of believers as a whole.

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Many conservative scholars see the seven churches listed in Revelation as prophecy of the church age. It is an interesting study, which I will not go into detail here, but I bring it up in the context of looking to see how Jesus describes the last days of the church age. So if you believe that you are living in the last era of the church age, as I do, then we should look intently at the last letter to Laodicea.

"And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write:
'The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation.

– Revelation 3:14

The name Laodicea is a compound of two root words consisting of *laos* and *dikē*. *Laos* means the common people. It is where we get the word laity from. A lay pastor would not be the lead pastor that shepherds the church, but rather, it would be a pastor from amongst the congregation. *Dikē* means a judicial ruling or decision. Together, the name Laodicea expresses a meaning of — rule by the people.¹ This is the church Paul warned about saying, “For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Timothy 4:3).

In each letter to the seven churches, Jesus selects a different title for Himself. The title of Jesus has a meaning that applies to the situation of each church. For Laodicea, Jesus chooses “the Amen, the faithful and true witness.” Jesus seems to be contrasting Himself as unwavering in truthfully speaking the Words of God, with the church of Laodicea who decides for itself what Words of God to retain, change, or disregard.

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Jesus continues:

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot.
Would that you were either cold or hot!

So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

– Revelation 3:15, 16

The diagnosis of this church is all bad news. There are no good vital signs to report. In fact, it is so bad that Jesus declares this church's apathy will cause Him to vomit them out of His mouth.

The diagnosis continues:

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.

– Revelation 3:17

We need to stop and ponder the spiritual significance of what Jesus is saying. He is telling the people of this church that they are completely unaware that they are "wretched" (shameful, base, despicable), "pitiable" (miserable, pathetic), "poor, blind, and naked." Not only is this congregation of supposed followers of Jesus contemptible and spiritually bankrupt, but they are absolutely oblivious to their true condition. In fact, they think they are rich and in need of nothing.

What could cause a large congregation to be delusional towards their spiritual condition? At a minimum, false teaching of God's covenant regarding the gospel must be included in the answer. These people didn't just miss it

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by a little, they missed it by a lot. Their true condition was polar opposite of what they believed.

Next, Jesus prescribes the remedy:

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.

– Revelation 3:18

The first prescription Jesus offers is “gold refined by fire.” David compares the Word of God with gold in Psalms 19:7-11 by elevating God’s word as “more to be desired are they than gold.” Again, David uses a refiner’s process as a metaphor for the purity of God’s Word, “The words of the LORD are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace” (Psalm 12:6). Jesus is offering the pure Word of the Bible as a remedy for this church’s spiritual condition. The church of Laodicea is in need of the pure Word, not the impure word.

The second prescription Jesus offers is “white garments”. People wearing white robes are interpreted to John by the 24-Elders in heaven as those whose sin have been washed by the blood of Jesus (Revelation 7:13, 14). This church is being prescribed atonement (reconciled to God through the blood of Jesus) to cure their condition, which means that they have not already been atoned. The people in this church are not saved, but rather are still in their sins.

The third prescription is “salve” to open their eyes. The Holy Spirit is who opens our eyes to see the truths and

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wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 2:12-14; Acts 28:25-27). Paul tells us that God gives the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32), and this church has a total lack of the Holy Spirit necessitating Jesus to counsel them to come to Him in order to receive the Holy Spirit.

In summary, Jesus' remedies for the church are the pure Word of God (Bible), the blood of Jesus (atonement/salvation), and the Holy Spirit. How could a church be in need of the Bible, salvation, and the Holy Spirit? The answer is because they were building their own kingdom instead of God's kingdom. They were seeking church members instead of disciples of Jesus.

Pay close attention to what Jesus says next:

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

– Revelation 3:20

Don't lose sight that Jesus is speaking to the church. He is knocking on a door and saying if anyone will invite me, "I will come in." Jesus is on the outside of this church, not inside. They are doing church without Jesus, but they believed that they were doing it with Him. They thought they were saved, but they were not. They thought they were teaching God's Word, but they were not.

How alarming is the situation when we consider that Laodicea is prophetic of the church age in which we are living now? This means that there are whole churches out in the world today that are in a similar state. There are other churches that are not, but may have many Laodiceans inside

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of it. How could this be? The answer goes back to the beginning of this chapter — we changed the mission Jesus gave us of making disciples into making church members.

Jesus had a rebuke of the church included in 5 of the 7 church letters. In each of those 5 letters, Jesus included an instruction for the church and the individual to repent. In His letter to Laodicea He writes, “Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent” (Revelation 3:19). Repenting is a refreshing and uplifting exercise as it means stopping the offensive action to God, appealing to His promised mercy, and receiving His faithful forgiveness. Just as important, it means getting back on the narrow path.

Let’s stop walking the path from the wide gate that is leading to destruction, and let us enter through the narrow gate that leads to life. It starts with you, the individual. You commit to follow Jesus in all that He says. You choose to submit to His will completely, no matter what the circumstances. You lay down your will for your life from this day forward and live the life that God gives you for His kingdom (Matt. 16:24, 25). You surrender all to God and seek to imitate Jesus in love for others. Then...you *disciple* others!

APPLICATION

“Key Performance Indicator” (KPI) – The one metric taken which has the most significant impact on all other metrics and directly influences how an institution performs or achieves its objectives.

- What is your KPI? What metric drives all your church decision making?

Attendance?

Offerings?

Facilities?

Staff?

- What is your metric for discipleship?
- Do you know if a person left your congregation when two people replaced the one that left?

Jesus left the 99 to go get the 1.

- Do you see where you may have compromised His kingdom for your kingdom (“my church” / “my group” / “my Bible study”)?
- Repent with your whole heart and be cleansed by God’s love and forgiveness.
- Commit to break from the tradition and established practices of church services and seek God daily to lead you in every facet of ministry.
- Change your KPI to whole hearts seeking God.
- Commit to making discipleship the main purpose of “church.”

I NEVER KNEW YOU

2

“I Never Knew You”

When I was about thirty years old, I returned to the God of my youth from a decade and a half of selfish and worldly living. My entire life had crashed around me, and I was so exhausted by all the struggles I had been dealing with for a long time. I fell to my knees, repented, and welcomed the immediate peace that arrived when I surrendered my life to God.

Afterwards, I picked up the Bible my father had given me years before in his desperate hope that I would read it and make changes in my life. I blew the dust off the cover, cracked it open for the first time, looked up into heaven, and prayed, “God, I’m going to read your Bible anew. I will do whatever You tell me to do, and I will stop doing whatever You tell me to stop doing.”

I made a commitment to myself to read the Bible daily from that moment on. It wasn’t very long until I came across the passage in Matthew 7:23 where Jesus tells those unsuspecting people that He will not grant them access into the kingdom of heaven. After they object to Jesus’ verdict by listing several religious activities they had done in His name, Jesus says to them, “I never knew you.” Reading that

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response by Jesus stopped me in my tracks. I was stunned by the realization that a large number of people who thought they were saved were actually doomed to spend eternity in hell!

Suddenly, I became concerned about the status of my own salvation. I began to wonder if I will be one of those people whom Jesus says He doesn't know. Those other people were mistaken in thinking that they were saved, what makes me any different from them? In this moment, all the collective preaching that gave assurances regarding my salvation crumbled. I began to doubt the legitimacy of those doctrines (teachings) I had heard and sought diligently for myself what the Bible actually had to say on this subject.

I bet many of you reading this are already pulling out your salvation doctrines such as "whoever believes in Him" (John 3:16), the *Romans Road*¹ (Romans 10:9, 10), or "whoever believes and is baptized will be saved" (Mark 16:16). All of these are one hundred percent true, but they are not absolute in isolation from the rest of the Bible. There are many additional verses that add information and context to those passages about the doctrine of salvation.

Each of those examples cannot stand on its own. For instance, if someone *believes* that Jesus died for his sins, but doesn't repent, is he saved? If that person never casts down his idolatry, pornography, or greed, but continues to live in his sinful ways, is he truly saved just because he *believes* in Jesus? Other Scriptures tell us the answer is "no" (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

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We can conclude then that the word *believes* in Jesus' statement "whoever believes in Him will not perish" (John 3:16) has a greater meaning than just the intellectual acceptance that something is factual. We must read and apply all of what else the Bible has to say about believing into Jesus' use of *believes* in John 3:16. We should seek to let Scripture define Scripture.

If we isolate a single verse from the rest of the Bible, we jeopardize diminishing the Word of God and risk deceiving ourselves and others. In this case, the concept of belief is used as a summation of many passages that further define what belief means—to have faith that Jesus is truth, to accept all of what He says, and to do whatever He instructs (make Him Lord).

I recently had a young convert in our Bible study interject with his supposition regarding Paul's statement, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13; Acts 2:21 quoting Joel 2:32). He firmly alleged that the verse meant everyone who says the sinner's prayer is saved and can never lose his or her salvation. By the way, why wouldn't he think this since he grew up attending several different churches repetitively hearing messages that implied such a meaning, if not explicitly teaching it? An average person hearing or reading that verse by itself could easily assume the same meaning this young convert did.

A brief examination of the surrounding passages and its origin in Joel 2 shine

If uncorrected, a false assertion of one's standing with God may insulate him from realizing his imminent danger of spending an eternity in hell and prevent him from taking the necessary corrective action.

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light to the truth being conveyed — God will not show any partiality (ethnically, societal status, how sinful they were, etc.) in granting salvation to anyone who comes to Him. He will accept everyone who repents and makes Jesus Lord of their life.

In the two examples above (“believes” John 3:16; “everyone who calls” Romans 10:13), a supremely consequential and untrue belief was established by careless or false teaching and was validated upon a solitary verse. If uncorrected, a false assertion of one’s standing with God may insulate him from realizing his imminent danger of spending eternity in hell and prevent him from taking the necessary corrective action. That is the error of *one-verse theology* — a belief system based upon a single verse without regard for additional information or insight from other passages of the Bible.

The man in our Bible study is not alone in the realm of one-verse theology beliefs. It is my experience from the people I have ministered to, who proclaim to be Christian, that many hold onto erroneous beliefs based solely on the abstract foundation of a single verse. The cure for this error is to consider the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27).

Let us start our effort to allow Scripture to define Scripture by looking at Jesus’ response to the many people saying, “I never knew you” and search the Bible for further understanding. We begin by looking into the Greek word *ginōskō* which was translated in this instance by Strong’s Concordance as *knew*.² This word for knowledge goes further than just meaning the possession of information. The definition includes the gaining of the knowledge by

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experience or relationship. *Ginōskō* implies the presence of intimacy and is occasionally used in the Bible to express intercourse between a husband and a wife (Luke 1:34). Obviously, Jesus knows, intellectually, who those people are, but He is stating that He never had an intimate relationship with them.

When Paul writes that God made Jesus “to be sin who *knew* no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21), he uses the same Greek word for *knew*. Jesus unquestionably had an informative understanding about sin. He comprehends more about sin than you or I do, however, Jesus was completely void of any relationship with sin. He never *knew* sin intimately like we have.

Since we now understand who Jesus doesn’t *know*, let’s search for who the Bible says that He does *know*. Paul reveals, “But if anyone loves God, he is *known* by God” (1 Corinthians 8:3). If anyone loves God, then they also love His Son Jesus (1 John 5:1). Here we see the qualifying factor in determining which people God *knows* and which people He doesn’t *know* — love. God *knows* those who love Him, and they have an intimate relationship with God.

Furthermore, Jesus tells us, “I am the good shepherd. I *know* my own and my own *know* me, just as the Father *knows* me and I *know* the Father” (John 10:14, 15). Jesus has an intimate relationship with those that love Him in the same manner as the Father has an intimate relationship with Jesus.

Next, we need to see how the Bible describes our love for God or Jesus. Jesus is very clear about defining love

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for us, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word” (John 14:23). “Whoever does not love me does not keep my words” (John 14:24). “You are my friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). In all three captions, Jesus connects a love relationship with obedience to His commandments.

John echoes Jesus with the same definition of love:

And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; [EMPHASIS MINE] this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.

– 2 John 1:6

John removes any ambiguity of what it means to love God in the following verse:

For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. [EMPHASIS MINE] And his commandments are not burdensome.

– 1 John 5:3

We see in those passages the Bible clearly defining our love for God as obedience. Love is not an emotional feeling towards someone or something, love is obeying God and our Lord Jesus. Love is a lifelong commitment to follow Jesus and make Him Lord over our lives. Jesus chooses to have an intimate relationship with those that love Him, and obedience to Jesus’ commandments is a demonstration of one’s love.

We have established that Jesus *knows* those that love Him, and those that love Him obey His

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commandments. Once you become aware of this truth, you will see this concept repeated throughout the Bible, including in the Old Testament. Let me show you a consistent theme of *knowing* God linked with obedience. Pay close attention to Pharaoh's response to Moses in the following verse:

But Pharaoh said, "Who is the LORD, that **I should obey his voice** and let Israel go? **I do not know the LORD**, [ALL EMPHASIS MINE] and moreover, I will not let Israel go."

— Exodus 5:2

Moses has just given Pharaoh a message from God telling him to let God's people free to go worship Him in the wilderness. Pharaoh responds that he doesn't *know* God so he will not obey what God instructs. The lack of obedience of God is connected with the lack of *knowing* God. Are people in the church any different than Pharaoh when they choose not to obey God?

After forty-years in the wilderness, Moses tells the people of Israel, "*Know* therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those *who love him and keep his commandments...*" (Deuteronomy 7:9). The conditional requirement stated for God to have a covenant relationship with the people is for them to "love Him and keep His commandments."

David, near the end of his life, is passing his wisdom down to the heir of his kingdom, and says to Solomon, "*know* the God of your father and serve him with a whole

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heart and with a willing mind” (1 Chronicles 28:9). David is instructing his son to have an intimate relationship with God by obeying Him with a whole heart and a submissive mind.

Obedience and love were necessary in the Old Testament (covenant), and they are still necessary in the New Testament (covenant). We see this same truth highlighted in the life of Jesus as He contrasts His own obedience of God with the religious leaders’ disobedience of God:

Jesus answered, "If I glorify myself, my glory is nothing. It is my Father who glorifies me, of whom you say, 'He is our God.'

But you have not known him. I know him. If I were to say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you, **but I do know him and I keep his word.**
[EMPHASIS MINE]

– John 8:54, 55

There are two noteworthy points that I would like to highlight. First, Jesus is disputing the religious leaders’ assertion that God is truly their God based on the fact they don’t obey Him. Jesus actually uses the term “liar” to describe these religious leaders. Secondly, Jesus connects proof of Himself *knowing* God by His own obedience (“I keep His word”) to God. Jesus is simply stating that He *knows* God because He obeys God.

How did Jesus obey God?

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

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But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, **and became obedient unto death** [EMPHASIS MINE], even the death of the cross.

– Philippians 2:6-8 (NKJV)

Jesus *knows* God and obeys Him in all things and at great personal cost. In fact, Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). Obedience to God is not earning our salvation. It is loving God and having a relationship with Him. It is what Jesus did, and it is what we are instructed to do as well.

The same standard Jesus applied to the religious leaders about obeying God is also applied to us, the church. If we claim that we know God but do not keep His commandments, we will be called liars too. This is why Jesus said to the "many" people, "I never knew you" —they didn't obey Him. John captions this point succinctly in his first Epistle:

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.

Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, [EMPHASIS MINE] and the truth is not in him,

but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him:

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– 1 John 2:3-5

True belief in Jesus would necessarily include an action of obedience to all that He commands us to do. Too often, believing in Jesus is reduced to an acknowledgment of a moment when one accepts as true that Jesus died on a cross for the sins of people. This acknowledgement frequently comes in the form of an emotional confession at the invitation of a pastor, but doesn't come with any consideration of what the cost truly is (Luke 14:28). Too many are not fully informed of what it means to give one's life to Jesus and unsuspectingly walk away thinking they are saved.

The individual often believes his or her response to the invitation is the end of the matter. He or she was offered God's forgiveness and eternal salvation in exchange for repeating a canned prayer or simply raising a hand in a congregation. Regardless of the intentions of the minister, many of these people believe they are in good standing with God for the rest of their lives. They hear proclamations of "you are now a child of God" and "you are saved," without any guidance on sincerity of heart or what it means to make Jesus Lord of their life (discipleship).

This may surprise some Christians, but the Bible uses the condition of obedience specifically with the topic of salvation several times: "He became the source of eternal salvation *to all who obey Him*" (Hebrews 5:9). "And...so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given *to those who obey him*" (Acts 5:32). "In flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on *those who do not obey* the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Those three

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verses are explicit about obedience being an essential element for salvation.

The gospel is much more than Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. The gospel literally is the good news of Jesus and His kingdom, and that gospel changes people, heals people, empowers people, and saves people. Obeying the gospel is not a one-time event, nor is it something that you ever finish doing. Obeying the gospel is what we do for a lifetime.

I have experienced many people respond to my attempts to share the love of God with them with a sincere assertion that they are already a believer. I never cease to be dismayed when I hear that same person spew vulgarities, brazenly lie, or unabashedly exhibit lasciviousness soon after they make such a profession. There is no evidence that such people have a relationship with Jesus, yet they are convinced they are saved.

Paul writes to Titus about this very situation:

They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

– Titus 1:16

Notice that they claim to *know* God, but this claim is proven untrue because of their actions (works). This verse sadly communicates what I observe from people both in the workplace and within the church. Pay particular attention to how Paul states that these people “deny” Jesus in the way they live. Jesus said, “whosoever shall deny me before men,

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him will I also deny before my Father” (Matthew 10:33 KJV). Paul seconds this consequence of denying Jesus in his letter to Timothy, “if we deny him, he also will deny us” (2 Timothy 2:12). If we deny Jesus in how we live our lives, Jesus will deny us.

In my experience, these people are much harder to reach for the kingdom of God than the typical unbeliever. It is much more difficult to convey a truth to someone who believes they already possess it. God has shown me the part the church has played in deceiving people with false assurances of salvation. We need God-fearing men and women fully equipped with the whole counsel of God to shine the light on those that are “deceiving and being deceived” (2 Timothy 2:13).

If the motive is to increase church membership, then lowering the standards for pronouncing someone saved is a great idea. If you lower the educational standards, more people will graduate. If you lower the physical standards for qualifying to be a police officer, you will increase the number of applicants. If you lessen the personal cost for people to get right with God, you will increase your numbers. You will most likely gain church membership, but will Jesus know them?

The wide gate and easy way in Matthew 7:13 are speaking of changing the requirements of God’s covenant, lessening His standards, and removing His conditions. The wide path offers the gift of God’s forgiveness of sins with little or no change in the lives of the recipients. Much of God’s Word is diminished so as to be tolerant of continued

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sin. No change in the sinful life is what makes this path “easy.”

By contrast, the narrow and hard way is a path of obedience to Jesus and His Word. We need to return to the true Word of God and His mission of discipleship for us. This will not be a popular movement in which the whole congregation will rally around the cause. You may even be accused of being legalistic and resisted by the authority in your local church. Obedience to Jesus is not legalism. It is biblical, and it is necessary for true belief.

If you are standing upon God’s Word, then you are standing on a foundation of truth in which God will do everything that He promises to do. We need to make sure people are presented with the truth so they can make an informed choice. They either choose to make Jesus Lord, or they reject Jesus and keep their idols (money, career, spouse, kids, self, etc.). God is not going to have an intimate relationship with people in idolatry.

I challenge you to search the Scriptures to know and understand what it truly says about the conditions of our covenant relationship with God. I ask that you take off the lens of your denominational perspective, whatever that may be, and take a fresh look at the Word of God in prayer. Give great room for the Word of God to correct your theology instead of your theology altering the Word of God. Let us allow God’s Word to say exactly what it says, and offer our hearts in submission to whatever He says — for He is God.

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APPLICATION

Realize that many people in your congregation may not be saved and believe that they are because of false one-verse theology beliefs.

- Does your preaching or teaching clearly communicate God's standards for a covenant relationship with Him?
- Do you teach God's definition of love?
- Is obedience to God emphasized in your discipleship?
- In order to know someone has a false belief, you must have a dialogue with that person.
- Commit to fellowshiping with each individual in your ministry and seek to know his or her relationship with God.
- Clearly differentiate the Bible's definition of love with that of an emotion or of feelings.
- Teach obedience to God is love.
- Defend obedience to God from detractors who claim legalism.

3

Form of God

Let me ask you to participate in a brief exercise to begin this chapter. The Holy Spirit did something very similar to me, and it forever changed my perspective on the topic of sin. Instead of just reading these next sentences and paragraphs, commit to yourself right now to take the necessary time to think over your thoughts and answers to the questions below. The more consideration you apply to your responses, the greater the gravity will be of the resulting revelation of truth. Again, I petition you to diligently contemplate your responses and do not rush through them. Here we go.

Do you have, or can you picture, an elderly frail grandmother bent over a cane or walker due to a broken down and fatigued body? Envision her wincing in pain simply getting up from the chair to go to the bathroom and returning to her seat fully exhausted from the trip. Realize that for her going up a flight of stairs requires the energy and commitment equivalent for a middle-aged person to run a mile. Every muscle, bone, and organ in her body are ill and weary of the effects of entropy from her long life. Maybe this person is your mother or father, or maybe it is you. Picture someone you love or know who fits this

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description and consider the daily suffering they endure as a result of old age.

What was the greatest physical pain you ever endured? A broken bone, child birth, a car accident, loss of a limb, severe sickness, or a debilitating disease? Do you know someone close to you that suffers from chronic pain and never finds total relief? Has a life-altering mishap touched someone in your family resulting in the loss of use of a portion of their body or even paralysis? Have you had someone in your home, or do you know someone dear to you who suffered through radiation and chemo treatments in a battle against life threatening cancer?

How many people do you know who are, or were, addicted to drugs or alcohol? Did you watch these people self-destruct day after day in getting a DUI, losing jobs, causing a divorce, committing physical and verbal abuse, abandoning their family, isolating themselves, going to jail or prison, and many other such harmful behaviors? As you got older, did you observe that the addiction problem was generational and spread to the children and grandchildren — the pain of that lifestyle cascading from branch to branch of that family tree? Did you feel sorrow and pain watching their self-destruction while feeling powerless to persuade corrective behavior?

Who was the closest person to you that has passed away? Have you already dealt with the death of your mother or father? What about a sibling, a best friend, or a spouse? Do you know someone who has had the devastating misfortune of having to bury a child? Did the pain of that loss fill you with fear of losing your own child?

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Now take a moment to compile all of these together — all the heartbreak, pain, and sorrow that you have experienced in your lifetime. Recall the extreme difficulty you had in dealing with many of those circumstances and ponder the life altering scars they left behind on your soul.

Why am I asking you to dwell on so much past hurt and risk opening fresh wounds? The Holy Spirit took me to this same point and then said to me, “Multiply all the pain, fear, and sorrow you have experienced with every single person that has ever lived on this planet. All that suffering came about because two people ate a piece of fruit that God commanded them not to eat. Do you think God is okay with sin?”

My perspective of sin changed in that moment. I had a new revelation of why God hates sin, and I began to see sin’s fingerprints everywhere. Riots and war on the news — *sin*. Corruption in our institutions and greed in our politics — *sin*. Death, pain, sorrow, fear, and disease — *sin*. Divorce, abandonment, loneliness, selfishness, bitterness, and unforgiveness in our families — *sin*. The effects of sin are extremely consequential to all of mankind, and its contagion is rampant and unrelenting.

God is not okay with us sinning. He did not send His only Son to die an excruciating death on the cross so we could continue sinning. God did not suddenly become tolerant of sin after Jesus shed His blood. No, God sent Jesus to die for the payment of our sins and to give us power not to sin.

POWER OF GOD

The church has done a wonderful job of sharing the love of Jesus and God's gift of forgiveness of sins, but as a whole, we have been derelict in discipling others to walk in the power of God. Sharing the Gospel and evangelism are instrumental components of making disciples, but the heavy work of discipleship is the day-to-day commitment to lead others in how to follow Jesus. To the detriment of so many, we have greatly ignored our responsibility to show others how to live life in the power of God. Pay particular attention to what Paul tells King Agrippa regarding power:

to open their eyes, [in order] to turn [them] from darkness to light, and [from] **the power of Satan to God**, [EMPHASIS MINE] that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.

— Acts 26:18 (NKJV)

Don't miss the qualifier at the end of the verse—"who are sanctified (set apart) by faith in me." Jesus gives *power* to His followers to depart from a sinful life through faith in Him and His Word. The Gospel of Jesus includes His power (Holy Spirit) to live a life of obedience to God (2 Peter 1:3, 4). God gives those who follow Jesus "*power, love, and self-control*" (2 Timothy 1:7).

True and sincere faith in Jesus is powerful in the changing of lives in the here and now. Scripture tells us that God enjoys interceding on behalf of those that love Him and whose hearts are wholly devoted to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). Furthermore, when God does intervene for us, we are told

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He can do “far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the *power* at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). If we really believe those words, why wouldn’t we jump at the opportunity to share this *power* with new believers? The Gospel (good news) includes God’s power to stop sinning.

In my own life, I have witnessed His power on so many occasions that I truly cannot remember them all. God has taken me — the most selfish, worldly man, consumed with pride and vanity — and completely transformed me into a man after His own heart. He exposed all of my idols and empowered me to cast them down. He crushed the unrelenting bondage of addictions that previously controlled me and made them impotent and repugnant in my sight. God was merciful and patient while I unwittingly resisted His will in some areas of my life, and His presence was evident in the subsequent conviction leading to corrective behavior.

God changed my priority in life from the pursuit of business for the betterment of my kingdom to following Jesus in the pursuit of God and His kingdom. Only God’s power could vanquish the fear that lurked under every facet of my life and usher in the peace which was previously elusive and unattainable. He figuratively held my hand through the darkest storms of my life and led me to discover how to completely trust in Him.

I’ve experienced physical healing that could only be explained by God. He has given me advanced knowledge about troubling family situations enabling me to handle the moment with wisdom that could only come from Him.

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Once, while I was brooding about the imminent death of my father, God prophesied — contrary to the doctor's diagnosis — that he would recover, thereby giving me abundant faith to encourage dad and my family.

He healed my marriage and restored my soul. He talks to me about everything that I bring up to Him. He constantly asks me questions causing my perspective to entirely change so I see my problems, the world, and others in my life through His eyes.

His wisdom is beyond my ability to describe eloquently other than to quote Solomon, "How much better to get wisdom than gold! To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver" (Proverbs 16:16). God has become so much bigger in my life than everything else combined, and yet, I continue to be astonished when I find out there is more of Him to be had than I previously realized.

My testimony is indicative of the *power* of God which Paul spoke about to King Agrippa, and His power is absolutely available to everyone who will have faith in Jesus. Being a disciple of His means that you will be walking in this *power* — "for the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in *power*" (1 Corinthians 4:20).

A question has burdened me throughout my walk with God — why are so many church people not experiencing what I experienced? How is it that people who proclaim the same God and attend the same church seem to remain captive by their previous strongholds? Paul gives the answer and the appropriate response in his letter to Timothy:

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having a **form of godliness** [EMPHASIS MINE] but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

– 2 Timothy 3:5 (NKJV)

What is the answer? People are participating in a religion that looks like God in appearance and name, but it is not the real thing. People in religion look identical to those who have a sincere relationship with Jesus. They meet in the same buildings on the same days, they use the same biblical language, they pray at the same times, they do similar good works, and they sing the same worship songs, but they are doing this to a *form* of Jesus.

A *form of godliness* is religion that looks Christian, but one that does not make Jesus Lord over their lives. Since Jesus is not Lord, members get to choose for themselves how much of the Bible they want to keep. The individual creates a *form of God* that will ascribe him or her all the benefits that only God could give, but a God that is accepting of whatever sinful life they wish to keep. Obedience to God becomes optional at best.

These people will go to churches that don't challenge their *form of God*. Instead, passages in the Bible about forgiveness of sins, God's great love for the world, being accepted as a child of God, salvation, and His gift of the Holy Spirit are accentuated from the pulpit while conditions, qualifiers, and commandments are mitigated or abandoned altogether. They are taught a *form of salvation* that is offered unconditionally to anyone who asks, and they are often reassured of their eternal destination of heaven by twisting Bible verses for their own purpose (2 Peter 3:16).

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There is no real power in this *form of godliness* because those who follow this *form of godliness* do not obey Jesus. Since they do not obey Jesus, they are not given the genuine Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32). We can see the evidence of the lack of obedience to Jesus in this *form of godliness* by Paul's description in the verses preceding 2 Timothy 3:5:

For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money,
proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their
parents, ungrateful, unholy,

heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-
control, brutal, not loving good,

treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers
of pleasure rather than lovers of God,

— 2 Timothy 3:2-4

Paul is describing the *form of godliness* church of the last days in great detail. Sadly, there are churches today filled with people who love themselves, money, or pleasures rather than God. Slander and gossip are too common amongst many congregations today wounding the hurt and vulnerable. The lack of self-control is often excused with consolations like, "Don't feel bad, we all struggle with sin."

The description of the *form of godliness* church that I want to highlight is — unholy. How can someone be a worshiper and follower of a holy God while intentionally living an unholy life? The answer is you cannot. We are told to both "pursue...holiness" (Hebrews 12:14 NKJV) and "be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15). You can, however,

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worship a *form of God* that both forgives and tolerates a continued unholy life.

What God has shown me is how frequently the Bible speaks of people who alter His Word and His commandments in order to justify their sinful hearts. For example, while Moses was on the mountain with God, the Israelites made an image of God (think *form of God*) that would allow them to get drunk and commit gross sexual immorality:

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. And they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "**Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.**" [EMPHASIS MINE]

And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings. And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

– Exodus 32:4-6

The golden calf represented a *form of God* in their own imagination (image). Moses was absent for a long time, and the people had the priest (Aaron) produce an image of God that they could worship and still keep their sinful hearts. The Hebrew word *Elohim* translated above as "these are your gods" is the same word translated as "God" 2,346 other times in the King James Version.¹ I believe this instance should be number 2,347. Notice that Aaron says

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that this golden calf is the God that “brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” The One that brought them out of Egypt was not Baal, Ashtoreth (Astarte), Asherah, Chemosh, Dagon, Molech, Rephan, or Tammuz, it was the one true living God.

See how Aaron makes a declaration about a “feast to the LORD” for the following day. Anytime you see the words “LORD” or “GOD” all capitalized in the Bible, it is a translation of the proper name of the one true God (discussed further in Chapter 6). So Aaron, by extension, just said that the golden calf is GOD (proper name of God) who led them out of Egypt by many miracles, and whom they will worship tomorrow on the biblical prescribed feast day.

They were not creating a new god, they were creating a *form of God*. A God that would accept their worship (“offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings”), and a God that would let them satisfy their sinful lusts (“eat and drink and rose up to play”). They were keeping much of what they knew about God, but altering Him in the way so as to be permissive of their sin.

Is there any difference between those Israelites who worshipped God followed by “eat drink and rose up to play” and “Christians” who worship Jesus, then continue with their sinful lives? Both groups proclaim to be God’s people, both groups worship Him on prearranged religious days, both groups perform religious acts, and both groups intentionally disobey God.

MY KINGDOM INSTEAD OF GOD'S

In chapter one of this book, I described how many churches have changed the God ordained mission of making disciples into their own mission of growing church membership. There is a story in the Old Testament which exemplifies the heart behind these modern churches subverting God's commandments and instructions with a *form of God*. This story parallels the one of Aaron in Exodus 32 in that the King of Israel constructed two golden calves as images of God to be worshipped.

In 1 Kings 11, we read about how God is going to punish Solomon for turning away from Him and not keeping His covenant (1 Kings 11:9, 11). God tells Solomon that He will break up his kingdom and give ten of the tribes (territories) over to his enemy Jeroboam. God then talks to Jeroboam and tells him he will be able to keep this new kingdom perpetually, just like David, as long as he obeys God's commandments (v.38). However, Jeroboam doesn't trust God and worries about losing his servants (think numbers of the congregation) over to Solomon's heir, Rehoboam. The Bible reveals Jeroboam's heart in this matter:

And Jeroboam said in his heart, "Now the kingdom will turn back to the house of David.

If this people go up to offer sacrifices in the temple of the LORD at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn again to their lord, to Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and return to Rehoboam king of Judah."

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So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, "You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. **Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.**" [EMPHASIS MINE]

– 1 Kings 12:26-28

Note that Jeroboam “took counsel” on how to keep his servants from traveling to Judah and worshipping God in the kingdom of his competitor. Jeroboam wasn’t worrying about following God’s commandments and doing God’s will, he was worried about preserving and increasing his own kingdom. In like manner, many church leaders take outside counsel and incorporate methods and worldly priorities to grow and preserve membership in order to increase their own kingdom and influence.

I have a dear pastor friend that once said, “When you get rid of God’s kingdom, you get rid of the King as well” — meaning if you are seeking to increase your own kingdom, then by extension, you have sacrificed God’s kingdom and replaced Him with yourself as king. When a church leader’s desire for growing numbers surpasses his desire to honor and teach all of God’s Word, then that leader has positioned himself as king.

Just like Aaron made a golden calf for Israel, Jeroboam made two golden calves which he told his people were the God “who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (v. 4). He made a *form of God* and put one at the northern end of his kingdom and the other one at the southern end of his kingdom for the purpose of making it more convenient for his subjects to worship God. Since it took a

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lot of time, money, and effort to travel all the way to Jerusalem three times a year as commanded in the Bible, these new *forms of God* made it more expedient, less costly, and easier on the people. King Jeroboam's subjects believed they were still worshipping God, but a God that was more considerate of their desires and accommodations than His own rigid commandments.

Jeroboam went to great effort to make his *form of God* very much like the real God. Jeroboam created "a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month like the feast that was in Judah." He created priests, had altars, sacrificed offerings all in resemblance of what God instituted in Jerusalem — he simply modified a few of God's inconvenient commandments. Jeroboam acted solely for the benefit of his own kingdom, and it had nothing whatsoever to do with God's kingdom.

In truth, Jeroboam deceived his people into idolatry by compromising God's commandments. Churches that compromise God's commandments to increase their own kingdom (congregation size) are deceiving their people as well. Paul warns of people who are "deceiving and being deceived" (2 Timothy 3:13). Many in leadership are deceiving people from a position of having been deceived themselves since deception has been baked into the structure of many seminaries, doctrines, traditions, and pastoral training programs.

The remedy Paul gives to the individual who finds himself in a *form of godliness* is to simply "turn away" (2 Timothy 3:5). Jesus gave a comparable instruction to His disciples regarding religious leaders who had a *form of*

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godliness saying, “Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit” (Matthew 15:14). “Let them alone” and “turn away” are parallel directives for true believers to not participate with people practicing a *form of godliness*.

We should not be surprised that churches may have many people who do not have a sincere relationship with Jesus. The occurrence of insincere worshippers of God mixing in with His genuine followers is not a new phenomenon. Read what God revealed to Ezekiel about some of the people that were coming to listen to him:

So they come to you as people do, they sit before you [as] My people, and they hear your words, **but they do not do them**; for with their mouth they show much love, [but] their hearts pursue their [own] gain.

Indeed you [are] to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, **but they do not do them**. [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Ezekiel 33:31, 32 (NKJV)

God tells Ezekiel that these people come to hear his preaching as if they were God’s people, but they will not do what God tells them to do. They speak a lot of wonderful expressions of love for God, but their hearts are truly after covetousness. They enjoy listening to the Word of God like people enjoying listening to a talented singer, but it doesn’t change their actions. Obedience is what God uses to distinguish between His true people and those who are

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pretending. Twice God emphasizes obedience by saying, "they hear your words, but they do not do them."

The same standard of obedience applies today to people who claim to be followers of Jesus. Christians cannot revert back into their sinful ways, embrace their former idols, and think that God will accept them. We may be able to fool our neighbor, our spouse, our kids, or even fool ourselves, but we are unable to fool God or manipulate Him into exchanging His gift of salvation to us while we are living in rebellious sin.

Paul writes to Timothy stating this very principle:

But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal:
"The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

– 2 Timothy 2:19

Paul designates two items to be God's firm foundation, which means God's unmovable underlying fundamental truth. The first foundational truth is that God knows who are His and who are not His. God cannot be deceived.

The second foundational truth is that anyone who takes the name of Jesus must depart from sin. Departing from iniquity is a commandment, not a suggestion or recommendation. Paul states it more plainly "...that you *must* no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds" (Ephesians 4:17).

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Let's choose to return to the firm foundation of God and pursue the real Jesus with our whole hearts. Let's get off the wide and easy path of a *form of godliness*, and walk the narrow way that God has given us. Let's commit to living our lives completely for Him. In this, we can be sure that "on that day" Jesus will not say "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22, 23).

You and I are instructed to make disciples everywhere we go — home, work, school, hobby events, church, mission field, etc. If we truly want to make disciples, then we need to submit to all that the Bible has to say and walk away from the *forms of God* that we may have previously embraced. The following chapters will be devoted to equipping you to fulfill the original discipleship mission Jesus gave each one of us:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,
baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the
Son and of the Holy Spirit,

**teaching them to observe all that I have
commanded you.** [EMPHASIS MINE] And behold, I
am with you always, to the end of the age."

— Matthew 28:19, 20

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APPLICATION

- Have you been tolerant of sin in your life, in your church, or in your preaching?
- Have you been presenting to others a form of Jesus who is indifferent to willful sin?
- Have you observed the absence of God's power in the lives of people who live behind the mask of a form of godliness?
- Repent and turn away from the form of godliness.
- Enter the narrow gate and make the real Jesus Lord of your life and of the ministry you serve in.
- Enthusiastically share with others the power available to escape the bondage of sin by faith and obedience to God.

4

Discipleship

About a year after I began doing prison ministry, God clearly revealed that He wanted me to disciple the men to whom I was ministering. I only possessed a rudimentary understanding of what disciple meant — *one who follows a teacher*, and I had no formal training. Prison ministry would be my school, and the Holy Spirit would be my teacher. I jumped in head first and went to work.

The prison I ministered within served as a felony parole violation facility for the entire State of Arkansas. Most of these men served between 60 to 180-day sentences and then paroled to their hometowns, government funded transitional housing, or to a faith-based chem-free facility. I set up a network of individuals across the state to initiate contact with a released inmate and invite him into a discipleship small group. My hometown of Hot Springs, Arkansas had a large government funded addiction/transitional establishment along with several Christian-based chem-free facilities, giving me ample opportunities to personally disciple many of these men.

Discipleship was on-the-job training for me, and I learned more about God from both the successes and the

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failures I experienced. As I was serving God in this ministry, He was teaching me more than I ever realized in the moment. It was during these times that God really showed me how to hear Him and how to rely on His guidance in all things.

Over the years, I've seen great transformation in the lives of many men. I have witnessed amazing emotional, spiritual, and physical healings many times over. I have watched as strongholds were torn down and observed spiritual breakthroughs bringing enduring peace and joy into those who were once filled with chaos and fear.

I noticed a consistent pattern of events occurring within this ministry: desperation for change, joy and hope after repenting, flourishing in Bible studies and small group activities, overcoming wilderness trials, healing in relationships, and receiving blessings of God in the rebuilding of a new life. However, for the majority of those men, it was short-lived. Soon after experiencing God's blessings in life, many men would become too busy to continue their previous schedule. Bible study and small groups would be first to be discarded. Next, a change in churches would take place putting a buffer between the individual and the people associated with the small group. Work and family opportunities would soon take priority over church services and functions. Ultimately, these men would quit church altogether and succumb to their previous lives.

When life became good, the allure of a convenient life, which the wide gate and the easy way (*form of godliness*) caters and cultivates, was more appealing than

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the narrow gate and hard way of discipleship. In the wide gate, worshipping God gets relegated to a one-hour event on Sundays. Jesus warned destruction will be the destination to those who choose to go through the wide gate (Matthew 7:14), and unfortunately, I have seen many such examples of men choosing to travel that road.

I began grappling to understand why there were success and change with one individual while there were failure and no long-term change with another in the same discipleship walk. More precisely, I was struggling to understand why the majority of men would end up walking away from God even though they were witnessing miracles and testimonies of God's power in their lives and the lives of other men within the same small group. I started questioning whether I was failing in my role of discipleship. I'm not sure how long I wrestled with this issue, but it was months, not days or weeks.

The Holy Spirit gave me the answer while reading the events described in Luke 17:11-19. In this story, ten lepers encounter Jesus traveling through their town and call out to Him for mercy. Jesus instructs these men to present themselves to the priests in accordance with Mosaic Law (Leviticus 14:2-4). On the way to the priest, all ten lepers get healed of leprosy, but only one of the ten men return to give thanks to Jesus. Jesus asks this man where the other nine lepers who had been healed were and why they didn't join him in glorifying God. Finally, Jesus tells the grateful man, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19). The reference "made you well" indicated a spiritual saving in addition to his physical healing. All ten

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men wanted physically healing, but only one of the men sought to glorify God.

The men I was ministering to were just like the ten lepers in this story. The lepers called out to Jesus for mercy wanting healing from leprosy, and the men I was discipling called out to Jesus wanting healing from addictions and consequences of sinful choices. The lepers were healed when they *obeyed* Jesus' instruction to go to the priest, and the men I was ministering to experienced healing when they *obeyed* Jesus during their time being disciplined in the small group.

The next parallel to this story shined light on the issue which I had wrestled with for many months. Once the nine lepers received their requested healing, they had no further desire for God and walked away. In a similar manner, once the majority of the men overcame their addiction, had family restored, obtained desired employment, or some other sought after blessing from God, they too walked away. The Holy Spirit taught me that many of the men to whom I had been ministering wanted healing from God, but not a relationship with God.

Another occurrence which I witnessed often troubled me as well. When walking with God became difficult for some of these men I was discipling, many of them would quit. In each incident, I would reflect on my actions and prayerfully seek understanding of the situation. As the number of incidents of men quitting added up, I became concerned that it was my fault and started to doubt the calling of God in my life.

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The Holy Spirit shined light on this issue of discipleship I was struggling with through another encounter Jesus had involving some of His disciples. In my earlier reflections, I had been hampered by wrong thinking that an individual who professed God, made some changes to his ways, and received blessings by God meant the individual had a sincere heart for God. A story in the Book of John corrected my misunderstanding and revealed that it is possible for disciples to quit following God. Jesus experienced this phenomenon with His own disciples.

In John chapter 6, we see a sizeable group of disciples having a hard time understanding Jesus' instruction to eat His flesh and drink His blood. John writes, "after this many of His disciples *turned back and no longer walked with Him*" (John 6:66). Jesus didn't try to convince them to stay with Him, and He didn't lower His standard to a more acceptable level for the offended individuals. He just let them go. In fact, Jesus turned to the twelve apostles and asked them if they wanted to go away with the others.

The Holy Spirit really emphasized to me Jesus' response, or rather, His lack of response to the departing disciples. Jesus didn't stop them from leaving, nor did He try to persuade them why they should continue following Him. Jesus didn't try to clear up their misunderstanding of what He had taught them so that they would stay. Jesus let them go because they didn't have a complete heart for God. John records Jesus pronouncing to these disciples that they didn't *believe* Him, along with a note to the reader that Jesus knew from the beginning those who do and do not *believe* (John 6:64).

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I felt like the Holy Spirit used these examples to lead me to make a prolific change in my ministry. I was led by God to quit expending time and resources trying to disciple every individual I came across through prison and jail ministries and to wait for God to bring me the chosen men whose hearts were truly seeking Him. The Holy Spirit moved in me to trust that God would show me who He wanted me to disciple and to wait on Him. I would continue to proclaim the good news of Jesus to all, but I would be intentionally watchful for those whom God would send me to disciple.

A CHANGE IN MY MINISTRY

2020 brought the COVID pandemic to the world resulting in me being barred from all previous ministry opportunities such as prison, jail, group homes, etc. It was during this period of time that I noticed God bringing an unusual sort of people into my life to disciple. Unlike the customary men I would encounter from jail and prison, God brought to me a young homeless man, a troubled youth from church, a man whose family was torn apart from his wife's adultery, a man discouraged from his life of religion, an elderly man returning to God from a decade of backsliding, and many other people with diverse backgrounds and stories. I recognized that these people were all testifying the same message of God calling them to *follow* Jesus (although they were not all aware that they were testifying to me). The Holy Spirit connected the dots so I could recognize that these were people He was bringing me to disciple.

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The first step of discipleship is Jesus calling those He knows will believe to *follow*. Jesus was recorded saying “*follow me*” to Peter and Andrew (Matthew 4:19), to Philip (John 1:43), and to Levi, otherwise known as Matthew, (Luke 5:27). Jesus declared that His sheep, which would include you and me, hear His voice and “*follow me*” (John 10:27). *Following* Jesus is the impetus of being His disciple. One who *follows* Jesus makes Jesus Lord (supreme authority and control) over every facet of his or her life.

Paul said, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also [am] of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1 KJV). Paul was not telling the church to follow himself while he follows Jesus, he was telling the church to *follow Jesus* how he *follows Jesus*. We are not to follow our pastor, a favorite seminary instructor, a respected book author, or an inspirational convention speaker. We are to follow Jesus. Paul directs us to receive the Word from pastors, authors, teachers, and speakers with openness of heart, but he tells us to search the Bible daily to see if what was told to us is true (Acts 17:11). When we search the Scriptures to confirm what is being taught to us is true, we are following Jesus (the Word of God) and not another person.

When I disciple a person, I teach him to seek God daily for everything in life, and I elevate the Word of God as the ultimate authority. I encourage each person to read his Bible and submit to whatever the Word speaks to him. Jesus said people do not experience the power of God because they do not know the Scriptures (Mark 12:24). Every problem we have in life has an answer in the Bible that will guide us to receive God’s power to solve, relieve, or endure

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the problem. My primary responsibility in discipleship is to teach others how to seek God for those answers through prayer and His Word.

I experienced amazing spiritual growth and powerful transformation in my life when I completely committed to do whatever God instructed. I share with each person whom I disciple the following verses as soon as we begin and invite them to make a commitment to submit to God in whatever the Word instructs:

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

— John 8:31, 32

These verses are foundational in the topic of discipleship, and I will reference back to them many times. The first point I would like to make is that Jesus defines disciples as those who live out (abide) His Word. That means we must live in accordance to both what the Bible says and what the Holy Spirit speaks to us individually. When we live the Word of God, we become Jesus' disciples. If we do not live out what the Bible and Holy Spirit say to us, then we are not His disciples.

The second point I would like to make requires revealing the purpose and power of the "if" statement. "If" statements are frequently used by God to put a fork in the road of decision-making in front of the reader by presenting two paths for him or her to choose which to travel upon. A binary choice is offered to the reader along with divine

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insight from God of a either a promised blessing, a particular outcome, or a warning of a serious consequence. God's divine insight is given to the reader in order to encourage him to make a wise decision.

If not explicitly stated, the negation of the reward, promise, or warning is inherent by implication in the binary choice. For example, if you say to your child, "If you clean your room today, I will get you some ice cream," you have created a twofold choice for your child. Your child either cleans his or her room and receives the promised reward of ice cream, or he or she does not clean his or her room and does not get the reward of ice cream. The denial of ice cream for not cleaning one's room was implied in the "if" statement.

"If" statements are free-will options. You have free-will to choose whether or not to obey God in the matter. God does not force it upon you, but rather He is simply advising you to select a wise course of action by promising either something desired in return, or warning you about a serious end result. The individual chooses to obey God, or he chooses to go his own way.

The third point I want to make regarding the previous verses is to highlight the promise Jesus makes with this particular "if" statement. If the reader chooses (free will) to live out what Jesus says, he will become His disciple. Because he becomes His disciple, Jesus says he will know the truth, which is Jesus (John 14:6), the Word of God (John 17:17), and the Holy Spirit (John 14:17). Consequently, because he knows Jesus, the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit, Jesus will set him free!

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The freedom that Jesus offers is total and comprehensive (John 8:36). Jesus delivers freedom from addiction, bitterness, unforgiveness, lust, demonic oppression, past wounds, abandonment, isolation, and anything else that binds us. Whatever stronghold the enemy (Satan) has upon us can and will be broken by Jesus *if* we abide in His Word. There is no strategy Satan can employ to take us captive so long as we abide in Jesus' Word. If we choose to live out Jesus' Word, then we will be set free from every bondage and stronghold that Satan and his world has upon us. What an amazing and powerful promise from Jesus! This is the fruit of discipleship!

The fourth point I would like to make is to have you notice to whom Jesus was addressing with this particular "if" statement — "Jesus said to the Jews *who believed Him.*" The people He was talking to were believers in Jesus, not unbelieving people. We can conclude from this statement that not all who believe Jesus will become His disciples. A believer becomes a disciple only when he abides in Jesus' Word. If someone believes Jesus and does not live out His Word, that person will not be His disciple, will not know Jesus, and will not be set free.

As I contrasted the many testimonies witnessed from Holy Spirit led discipleship with the void of testimony deriving from cookie-cutter church programs, I was taken aback by the seriousness of the discrepancy. In deep prayer regarding this, God showed me that the lack of people being healed in churches is a result from church leaders exchanging Jesus' commandment to make disciples with their own pursuit of larger congregations and greater

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influence. God revealed to me that many churches are seeking church members instead of disciples, and He guided me through Scriptures to understand how different those two things are.

Modern-day churches which have abandoned the commandment to make disciples are content with a large crowd of people who merely say they believe in Jesus. Since these people are not being led, encouraged, and taught to abide in His Word, they are not being set free. Over time, many will become frustrated with a lack of change in their lives and quit Jesus and the church. The truth of the matter is those churches will likely not recognize the loss of the individuals so long as the number of new members exceed the number of those who quit. This is a sad reality being replicated across the country and throughout all denominations.

So what are some features of a disciple? In the case of Jesus' commandment, a disciple is someone that is fully immersed in the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. A disciple submits his heart to Jesus and is careful to observe and keep all that Jesus commands (Matthew 28:19, 20). A disciple abides in Jesus and lives out His Word (John 8:32). A disciple of Jesus loves others in the same manner as Jesus loves that disciple (John 13:34, 35). A disciple of Jesus abides continuously in Him and glorifies the Father in producing abundant fruit (John 15:8).

Luke records Jesus saying that one cannot be His disciple if he loves his parents, wife, siblings, children, or his own life more than Jesus (Luke 14:26). Jesus actually uses the word "hate" to demonstrate the wholehearted

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submission to God's will required to be His disciple. Love for mother, father, wife, husband, and even one's own life cannot be weighed equally with following Jesus. After giving a couple of parables that emphasize the serious commitment to the final objective, Jesus says, "So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

A complete surrender of one's life is the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:38). Denying oneself and surrender of one's life are what make the path of the narrow gate hard, and anything less than total surrender of one's life becomes the wide gate that leads to destruction. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after Me, let him take up his cross daily and *follow Me* (Luke 9:23). A cross is an instrument used to execute someone, so when Jesus tells us to take up our cross, He is telling us to sacrifice our lives.

What is a church member? The modern-day church member is simply a person who enjoys the activities, services, music, and facilities of a particular church and chooses to attend regularly. The depth of commitment required of a new member for many modern-day churches is as shallow as checking a box on a "connect card" located in the front of the seats. The church is satisfied by the increase to the crowd size and will work vigorously to produce exciting and fun events to keep the new member engaged and create opportunities to build relationships with other members.

To maintain the primary mission of growing church membership or attendance, the cost of following Jesus gets mitigated greatly or avoided altogether. An atmosphere is

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created that falsely legitimizes the wide gate and easy way for a person to be reconciled to God without the need to do anything in return. In the two paths of walking a Christian life, only one comes with a promise from God of power to change lives, and that is discipleship.

There is an epidemic in churches of people who have been deceived into thinking they are following Jesus but are in reality following a form of Jesus. A cause of this epidemic comes from churches abandoning God's discipleship standard and His teaching of requiring a person to surrender his whole life to follow Jesus. Many people inside our churches believe their profession of belief in Jesus has given them irrevocable salvation from God regardless of the lack of action on their professed belief. If first-time marriages in America have a 43% failure rate¹ of couples who professed "until death do us part," why should we expect professions of belief in Jesus within the church to be any more enduring and sincere?

Churches lowering God's standard of receiving salvation results in people not truly repenting, not giving their whole heart to God, not seeking God's complete will in their lives, and not abiding in His Word. These people are in desperate need for the genuine Jesus to heal their marriages and families, but they are being given a powerless religion instead of an all-powerful God. These people are in need of someone loving them enough to disciple them and tell them the indisputable truths of the Bible.

HARD TRUTH

Let me give you an example of Jesus loving someone by telling him the hard truth. There is an instance where a rich ruler came running to Jesus, knelt before Him, and asked how he could receive eternal life. After a brief discussion, Jesus tells this man, "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, *follow me*" (Luke 18:22). The man became dejected by Jesus' instruction and walked away because he loved the riches of this world. The price was too costly for this man to become Jesus' disciple, and Jesus did not compromise His requirement in order to gain a follower (think church member). Jesus let this man walk away because the man's wealth and its worldly influence was of greater importance in his own heart than God's will.

Jesus' terms for receiving salvation given to the rich ruler were excessively higher than what one typically hears from most pulpits. The ruler didn't hear, "Just repeat these words..." along with a canned salvation statement. He didn't hear Jesus say, "Ask Me to come into your heart and receive the forgiveness of your sins." The rich ruler heard Jesus say that he needed to lay down the idol that was in his heart (love of money) in order to have salvation.

Jesus' action with the rich young ruler was loving in that He made the obstacle that needed to be removed in order to obtain salvation known to the ruler so that he could deal with it. The Bible does not record what ever happened to this man, but it is reasonable to think it possible that the wealthy ruler came to Jesus with his whole heart later in his

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life. Regardless, it was loving of Jesus not to deceive the ruler into thinking that he obtained eternal life (salvation) when in fact he had not. Jesus said you cannot serve God and riches (Matthew 6:24), and the rich young ruler chose his wealth over God.

The return to the mission of discipleship in the church is greatly needed. That return starts with godly men and women leading other people in their circles of influence to diligently seek what the Bible truly says about following Jesus and submitting their whole lives to Him. There will be difficulties and resistance to those who teach the truths about the narrow gate of discipleship, but Jesus promised those people that He will be with them always (Matthew 28:20).

The following chapters of this book will touch upon topics and doctrines that have been used to deceive believers into a powerless form of godliness. It is my hope that after reading this book, you will be well informed to identify wrong doctrines used to promote falsehoods and be fully equipped to counter those efforts with biblical truths.

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APPLICATION

- Do you believe one can effectively “disciple” an individual one-hour a week from the pulpit?

The clear answer is “no.”

- Do you think it is possible to disciple an individual with a one-way conversation (preaching)?

The clear answer again is “no.”

- Do you believe that seasonal “life-groups” or similar ancillary programs are sufficient or effective in discipling the congregation?
- Discipling others is not an ancillary option only for those who request it. Discipleship is the mission or purpose of church. It must be the primary objective. Choose to obey this mission from Jesus and do not be worried about being different than other churches.
- Be intentional on making people aware of what Jesus said are the “costs” of following Him.
- Prayerfully meditate on the promise of **being set free** to those who “know” (intimate relationship) the truth.
- Be deliberate in guiding people to choose to “abide” in Jesus and God’s Word.

5

Breaking Traditions

The word “tradition” is defined by Oxford Languages as *the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation*. It further defines “tradition” in the context of Theology as *a doctrine believed to have divine authority though not in the Scriptures*. There are both good and bad traditions based upon both true and false doctrines (teachings). From generation to generation, false doctrines get cemented into traditions with repetition and time.

Each passing year, decade, century, and millennia increases the presumed authority of antiquity preventing challenges to the traditions handed down. Traditions act as a shield for false teaching, preventing one from analyzing the merits of the doctrine and discovering the truth. Over the years, I have come face-to-face with people I respect rejecting clear evidence that contradicted their belief of church traditions without any consideration of the evidence.

The first occasion happened with my father. My dad consumed books about the Bible and was well read on many topics. I often stated that I would put my dad up against any pastor in the city and would favor my dad in answering

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anything to do with the Bible (this was not a critical statement of the pastors, but rather just an admiring truth about how well read my father was on many Bible subjects). I was engulfed in my own studying of the Bible and became introduced to a controversy having to do with the tradition of Good Friday. The dispute exists between a church tradition which proclaims that Jesus died on a Friday, hence Good (holy) Friday, and a prophetic Scripture of Jesus speaking about His forthcoming burial and resurrection:

For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

– Matthew 12:40

Jesus clearly communicates in this passage that He will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth just like Jonah spent three days and three nights in the belly of the whale. This specific time detail becomes a problem with many who hold to church tradition regarding Good Friday. Scripture and church tradition agree that Jesus was resurrected on a Sunday morning, so counting backwards, we find it impossible to have three days and three nights between Friday and Sunday morning. One of those two beliefs, the tradition of Good Friday, or Jesus' statement in Matthew 12:40, is incorrect.

When I showed this discrepancy to my dad, I assumed he would have already known this and expected to hear some interesting perspective about it. Instead, I witnessed him shutting down the discussion with some pedestrian excuse that I shouldn't take the three days and three nights literally. This logic and tactic taken were very

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uncharacteristic of my dad. He was known to search Scriptures and commentaries weighing contrary opinions to know God's Word inside and out. In this circumstance, I had witnessed my father dismissing something Jesus clearly said because it challenged a religious tradition he held.

We didn't speak about this topic again until a couple of weeks had gone by, and then dad acknowledged what Jesus had said would be literal and admitted the verse had challenged his belief in the church tradition. Thankfully, dad let go of the tradition error and stood firm on the Word of Jesus, but it was a moment I would not forget. In this incident, I had come to realize how powerful traditions are in affecting even someone as sturdy in faith as my dad.

The second occasion came from my mentor in prison ministry, Chaplain Bradford. Chap (the nickname everyone called him by) was a wonderful man of God who loved Jesus with all his heart. He was daily reading the Bible, led by the Spirit in ministry, and loved to preach Jesus to those who came into his prison. Chap also loved his two expeditions to Israel. He must have taken over a thousand pictures during his two trips. Chap wasn't too computer savvy, so I spent a lot of time helping him put his pictures into a PowerPoint presentation. Most of his pictures and excitement were centered on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

One night over dinner, I mentioned that I had just finished an amazing book by Robert Cornuke titled *Temple*. This book exhaustively challenges the location of the true Temple Mount utilizing much Scripture and a variety of historical books. One of the main conclusions the author

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presented in his book was that what we believe to be the Temple Mount is actually the remains of a Roman fort. I presented this topic for conversation with Chap anticipating a great discussion on the merits of the author's conclusion and the evidence presented from Scriptures. Instead, I got a complete shutdown similar to the one I had previously experienced with my father. Chap didn't want to talk about it at all. I pushed a little further and asked if he would at least hear some of the Scriptures the author presented, and he flatly said, "No." The tradition of the Temple Mount, coupled with Chap's personal excursions to Israel, became an unpierceable shield to any potential contradictory truth.

Although neither of the two topics (Good Friday and the Temple Mount) are significant to one's walk with God and relationship with Jesus, both experiences demonstrated the power of tradition to suppress even the slightest consideration of an opposing opinion. In the case of the Temple Mount, searching the Scriptures to ascertain if the tradition was true or not wasn't pursued by Chap because of the pre-supposed inerrancy of the tradition.

There are, however, false traditions which have infiltrated many churches that do have a significant and consequential effect to one's potential relationship with God. Jesus speaks of this actuality in Mark 7, and He reveals both the seriousness of its effects along with the scale in occurrences. The chapter starts off with the Pharisees (religious leaders) confronting Jesus about His disciples not washing their hands before eating in accordance with their religious traditions.

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Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.

(For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders,

and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)

And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, "Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?"

– Mark 7:1-5

The first thing I would like to do is to caution against getting fixated on the specific details of this point of contention between Jesus and the religious leaders, but rather take note of the greater matter Jesus reveals to us through this interaction. Many commentaries focus only on the legalism issue of washing esteemed by the Pharisees and scribes, therefore missing the application of Jesus' overall warning regarding religious traditions in general. This point will be made clear later in this encounter.

The religious leaders question Jesus why His disciples do not practice the ceremonial washings. We are informed the religious leaders "*and all the Jews*" practice this tradition and that the tradition was passed down from

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the elders (think antiquity). The disciples of Jesus were a small minority of the Jewish population who were rejecting the venerated religious practice assumed to be in accordance with God's will, and the religious leaders wanted Jesus to answer for this action.

Following Jesus will often position a person to be at odds with a loud and populous majority of religious people.

Jesus' refusal to validate the need for the ceremonial washings reveal a divide between those following religion and those following Jesus. Following Jesus will often position a person to be at odds with a loud and populous majority of religious people. Where others may succumb to the pressures associated with normative social influence (expressing opinions or behaving in ways that help us to be accepted or that keep us from being isolated or rejected by others), Jesus stood firm on the Word of God.

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Not only does Jesus not pacify the religious leaders by accommodating their traditions, He goes on to expose the bad heart behind the pretense of virtue in their religious traditions.

And he said to them, "Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "'This people honors me with their lips, **but their heart is far from me;** [EMPHASIS MINE]

in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.'

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– Mark 7:6, 7

Recognize the tone of Jesus' response to the religious leaders was not polite at all. Many people try to present Jesus as always avoiding confrontation, disagreements, or conflict, but that is not what is happening here. In fact, Jesus is actually calling the religious leaders "hypocrites." Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 in unmasking the hypocrisy of the heart of the religious leaders and those who follow them. Their tradition gives an outward appearance of worshipping God by performing a ceremonial action (based upon a Levitical law for priests entering the Temple), but their appearance of honoring and fearing God is not sincere. Jesus is contrasting the counterfeit outward worship (ceremonial actions) with authentic inward worship (from the heart). Jesus goes on to say that their worship is in vain (without effect, baseless, worthless). The reason their methods and displays of worship are worthless is because their worship doesn't come from their hearts.

When God was showing me the real issue between Jesus and the religious leaders, He highlighted a quote from Isaiah in Jesus' response — "but their heart is far from Me." God pressed upon me to search every occasion where "heart" is mentioned in the Bible. I had spent several weeks studying these passages and being led by the Spirit in prayer on this topic. I completed the research and thought I understood all of what God intended to teach me regarding the heart when He used an event with my wife to add something I will never forget. Before I tell you this story, understand that this has nothing at all to do with my wife's

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heart for God in general. This story is about a large majority of religious people perceiving an act of worship to be good and spiritual when in fact, it had no value of worship to God because of the heart.

I have attended a worship and praise service every Friday at 6 p.m. for several years. This worship service is not a popular church event attended by scores of people. The reason for its low attendance is because 6 p.m. on Friday is probably the most selfish hour of the whole week. Most people are finishing their fifth day of work and looking forward to going out to dinner, family time, relaxation, or hobbies. My wife is one of those who looks forward to coming home and relaxing in front of a TV, so she has never accompanied me to a Friday evening worship service.

On this particular Friday, while I went to our weekly praise and worship service, my wife went to a Lauren Daigle concert. Lauren Daigle is my wife's favorite Christian singer, and she had been anxiously looking forward to this concert for a while. I was deep into worship when God asked me, "Where is your wife?" I knew God was not asking me this question because He didn't know where my wife was located, rather, I suspected God was about to reveal something to me.

I responded, "She's at the Lauren Daigle concert."

He asked, "Why isn't she worshipping with you?"

As soon as He asked me that, I knew His point. My wife has been a fan girl her whole life. Before she had a relationship with God, she read all the magazines about Hollywood actors and actresses. She would watch shows

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like Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood, and Inside Edition to know all the details of her favorite Hollywood stars. This fangirl characteristic of my wife still remains in her Christian life. She is a big fan of the people who sing her favorite Christian music. The point God was making to me was that my wife didn't go to the Lauren Daigle concert with a heart to worship Him, she went to be entertained by her favorite Christian celebrity.

The next day at our Saturday morning men's group, someone made a point about how God cares about the heart, and I interjected to share the story about what God revealed to me through my wife. Here is where the point of the story comes to a head. Everybody but one person tried to correct my interpretation of the conversation God had with me at the worship service. Some people thought I was jealous that my wife didn't go with me and said I should be happy that she went to a Christian concert. Others tried to find the silver lining in that it shows that my wife is growing in her relationship with God because she went to the concert. This type of reaction kept going from person to person until at one point a man sarcastically asked me if I would rather she had gone to an AC/DC concert.

The reactions of the group truly startled me. As soon as the meeting was over, I went to my vehicle and prayed, "God, did I misunderstand You? Were these men being used by You to correct me?"

I heard God reply in my spirit, "Go home and ask your wife about the concert."

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I was asleep when my wife arrived home from the concert the previous night, so I hadn't talked with her about her evening. I went home and immediately asked my wife how the concert was. She came to life with much excitement relaying what a great time she had. She talked about how close she was to Lauren, what kind of clothes she wore, how her hair looked, how Lauren didn't act pretentious, but seemed to be just like an average everyday person. I kid you not, this went on for more than 15 minutes nonstop. I didn't interrupt or lead my wife's answer in any way, shape, or form. She just kept going on and on about Lauren Daigle, and nothing about God.

The point God was showing me was that what other people see on the outside and call worship of God is of no value (vain) to Him if the heart is not involved. My wife has a heart for God, but she was not worshipping God by going to the Lauren Daigle concert. Yet, all but one of the men in our group couldn't see past the outward appearance of worship to see the greater matter that God looks upon the heart.

The statement Jesus makes next in His dialogue with the Pharisees is significant in understanding the seriousness of the indictment against the religious leaders:

You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men."

– Mark 7:8

The underlying offense was the intentional abandonment of God's commandments so as to install man's own will. The religious traditions held by the

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Pharisees and their followers substituted the high and weighty standards of God's love and holiness with their own hollow rituals and feigned words. These religious leaders demeaned God by subverting His commandments with their doctrines and traditions.

I cautioned earlier not to miss the big picture by focusing only on the details of what started this altercation. Jesus continues His accusation against the religious leaders — *rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition* — by transitioning to another tradition the religious leaders have instituted to circumvent God's commandment:

And he said to them, "You have a fine way of **rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition!**

For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.'

But you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother, "Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban"' (that is, given to God)--

then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother,

thus making **void the word of God by your tradition** [ALL EMPHASIS MINE] that you have handed down. And many such things you do."

— Mark 7:9-13

This second tradition Jesus injected into this conversation includes two related commandments which

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the religious leaders undermined with their doctrine. The two commandments are to honor one's father and mother (Exodus 20:12) and to execute the person who curses his father and mother (Exodus 21:17). The foundation of those two commandments is love and honor for one's parents. Love and honor for parents include respecting them, submitting to them, and caring for their welfare as they get older.

The religious leaders constructed a loophole allowing people to evade the requirement of taking care of their parent's material needs. The religious leaders established a doctrine called Corban, from the Hebrew word *qārbān*¹ meaning offering, whereby one can legally and religiously circumvent the obligation of providing one's own money or material in aid to his father or mother under the guise that the money or material needed was already dedicated to God. The religious leaders twisted Scripture (Levitical offerings in this particular instance) to create a tradition appeasing their selfish greed and nullifying the practical cost of obeying God's commandments. In short, they rejected God and covered themselves with a false teaching (doctrine) of His commandment that made them appear as if they obeyed Him.

There is a cause and effect relationship with obeying or disobeying God and one's quality of life. Solomon wrote to his son, "My son, do not forget my teaching, but *let your heart keep my commandments*, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you" (Proverbs 3:1, 2). As we can see from that Scripture, keeping God's commandments have correlating effects of life and peace.

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The entire chapter of Deuteronomy 28 records Moses cataloging specific blessings you will receive if you keep God's commandments and specific curses you will experience if you break His commandments.

The commandment from God to honor your parents comes with a promise of both a good life and a longer life (Ephesians 6:2, 3). Have you ever stopped to consider how many people may have died prematurely because they dishonored their parents? We never hear of coroners and doctors listing as a cause of death that someone broke the commandment in Exodus 20:12, but if you believe God and His Word, then many people have gone to their graves earlier than necessary because they did not honor their mother and father.

This is an example of what Jesus meant when He said, "Making the Word of God of no effect through your tradition" (Mark 7:13 KJV). The religious leaders created a tradition that gave them an outward appearance of honoring their parents (Corban), but their tradition did not have the same effect of a long and good life. The tradition passed down to the people caused many to experience a much more troubled and shorter life.

As bad as a troubled and shorter life may be, there is a greater matter which Jesus is addressing, and that has to do with salvation. The more serious "effect" the religious leaders are causing by their religious traditions is to hinder man in the way of reconciliation with God. Jesus accuses them in another interaction saying, "For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow *those who would enter to go in*"

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(Matthew 23:13). Let the significance of that accusation sink in. Jesus is implying people who would have gone into God's kingdom were prevented from doing so because of the actions of these religious leaders.

In short, the traditions of the religious leaders gave people a false path to receiving God's salvation by nullifying His commandments. The commandments of God are not trivial, nor are they unimportant. Keeping God's commandments is necessary to maintain a covenant relationship with Him (Jeremiah 7:23; Exodus 19:5). Keeping God's commandments is necessary for having a friendship with God (John 15:14). Regardless of what modern doctrine or tradition might say, obeying God is still necessary for New Testament salvation (Hebrews 5:9; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; 1 Peter 4:17; Acts 5:32).

The deeper issue Jesus is bringing to light behind the religious leaders thwarting God's commandments is their heart. The traditions display an outward sentiment of reverence to God, but the actions taken are coming from a heart that doesn't honor Him. God told Samuel, "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the *LORD looks on the heart*" (1 Samuel 16:7). When a person has a heart for God, obedience to His commandments will naturally follow. God spoke through Moses saying God tests you, "*to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not*" (Deuteronomy 8:2 NKJV).

In the first tradition example, the religious leaders created traditions of ceremonial washings that give an appearance of being spiritually clean while neglecting any

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regard for the need of genuine spiritual cleaning of the heart. Jesus called the religious leaders “Hypocrites” because they “clean the outside of the cup and plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence” (Matthew 23:25). They represented themselves as leaders of the covenant people of God, but their hearts were for themselves and for the power gained from the positions they held.

One of the central conflicts experienced in the early church came from converts holding on to a belief that one needed to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1). These converted Jews were contaminated by religious traditions that put such an emphasis on the external displays of worship, so they brought that same emphasis into Christianity. The covenant between God and Abraham required all males to be circumcised starting with Abraham (Genesis 17:10-14) and continued through Moses (Leviticus 12:3; John 7:23). However, from the very beginning, circumcision was only a “token” of the solemn agreement between God and man (Genesis 17:11 KJV). The real circumcision God cared about was the circumcision of the heart.

Although the Pharisees were outwardly circumcised, many were not in a covenant relationship with God. God tries the heart of man, not the outward act of circumcision. Read what God told the disobedient Jews through Jeremiah, “Circumcise yourselves to the LORD; *remove the foreskin of your hearts*...lest my wrath go forth...because of the evil of your deeds” (Jeremiah 4:4). Circumcision of the heart includes a desire and willingness

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to obey His commandments. Jesus was rebuking the Pharisees and scribes because their hearts were disobedient to God's commandments.

The same standard of searching of the heart by God applies to the New Testament church, "For with the heart one believes and is justified..." (Romans 10:10). The heart has been, is currently, and will continue to be, the standard for which God judges people. Keeping God's commandments from the heart is the true circumcision — "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (1 Corinthians 7:19).

Jesus added to His serious accusation of the religious leaders which I have delayed to highlight until now — "*and many such things you do.*" Jesus is saying there are "many" more traditions in religion that appear to be according to His Word, but in reality, are a hindrance to people coming to God. We are only introduced to two examples of religious teachings and traditions nullifying God's commandments in this encounter, but now we are told there are many more traditions which have the same effect.

The inclusion in the Bible of this exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders is for our benefit today, as well as those to whom Jesus was talking. The Pharisees and scribes of Jesus' time are the preachers, church leaders, elders, seminary instructors, etc. of our time. If we would take an honest look at how the modern church is leading people to God, we would unfortunately find similarities to the situation Jesus was addressing with the Pharisees. We would discover many modern-day doctrines and traditions

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held by a majority of Christians which are making the commandments of God of “no effect.”

The Bible recounts this encounter between Jesus and the religious leaders so that we can be informed and take corrective actions. In the following chapters, I will introduce a few doctrines I consider to be the greatest hindrance to people experiencing the genuine and amazing power of God in their lives. These modern-day Christian traditions follow the same pattern utilized in the examples in Mark 7 — twisting of Scripture(s) to validate a false teaching removing obligations for people to obey God’s commandments. These Christian traditions duplicate the outward appearance of godliness, while discarding genuine discipleship standards.

Reverting from an emphasis on increasing church membership (“wide gate”) back to discipleship (“narrow gate”) is the corrective action that must take place within the church body as a whole. Corrective action must begin first with each of us, individually. We must surrender our hearts completely to God without any reservation or conditions. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*” (Matthew 5:8). Peter told a man attempting to purchase the Holy Spirit, “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, *for your heart is not right before God*” (Acts 8:21). The Bible tells us that God searches up and down the earth to help those *whose hearts are fully committed* to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). Our hearts are what He wants, and our hearts are what we must surrender to Him.

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Secondly, we should examine each and every tradition, doctrine, and denominational divide with the entirety of the Bible to see if what we were taught and believe is true (Acts 17:11). If we find Scripture to be contrary to what we have believed or were taught, then we need to commit to laying down the tradition or doctrine and stand firm on the Word of God. Jesus said, “My doctrine is not mine, but his that sent me. If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or [whether] I speak of myself.” (John 7:16, 17 KJV). We should no longer endorse or tolerate religious traditions and doctrines that change God’s Word and standards. When we find teaching that differs from God’s Word, we must reject the doctrine or tradition, no matter how popular and widespread it may be, and hold on to the Word of God.

Finally, we should disciple those whom God has brought into our lives with a deliberate focus on preparing and molding their hearts for God. If God looks upon the heart, then we should look upon the heart as well. Let’s stop legitimizing any doctrine or tradition which minimizes or negates a sincere heart change for God.

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APPLICATION

- Have you discovered biblical truths that conflicted with something you were previously taught and once believed?
- Do you think it possible that some church traditions you believe now could be false?
- Prepare your heart to allow God to reveal any truths which may conflict with longstanding beliefs and traditions.
- Prayerfully ask God to help you know what is true and what is false.
- Finally, allow Scripture to shape your understanding and resist having your understanding shape Scripture.

6

God's Name

As God was revealing false doctrines and traditions to me, I would share what I learned with our Bible study group, Saturday men's group, or individually with pastors and friends. Without fail, I would receive a fierce defense from somebody in the group. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, most people become very defensive against challenges to their church traditions without ever examining the merits of either the challenge or the tradition. Several times it came with an immediate slamming shut of their Bible echoing an immediate slamming shut of their hearts and minds to any opposition of their assumed venerated tradition.

There was one exception to that rule in my experience, and that has to do with the tradition regarding God's name. When I shared with others about this particular tradition, along with what the Bible actually teaches us about God's name, I found the majority of people enthusiastically receptive to the information. In fact, I often observed reactions from people displaying displeasure for not having been taught this before. For this reason, I decided to start our journey examining church traditions together with this one first.

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What is God's name? Believe it or not, many professing Christians do not know His name. I have surveyed numerous people who have been active church goers for many years, and most of them couldn't venture a guess at what God's name is. Some of these people have been in church for decades, taught Bible studies, or led ministries. Try it for yourself, and you will be stunned to realize how many people you know in church who cannot tell you the name of the God they worship.

How can multitudes of people worship a God and not know His name? Tradition. I want you to take a moment to really grasp the scope and power traditions have over people. In this case, a tradition has made a sizeable percentage of millions of practicing Christians ignorant of the name of their God and incurious in taking any action to ascertain it. That is a powerful effect!

So what is God's name? It's not Jesus; that is His Son's name. The Father's name is *YHWH*, and His name occurs in the Old Testament 6,519 times. The original Hebrew language did not include the use of vowels in written form, but they were present in the spoken form. Since the name of God has not been spoken for several millennia, we are not completely sure how it is pronounced today, but many scholars believe it to be expressed as *Yahweh*.

Why wasn't His name spoken for thousands of years? That is where the tradition comes into effect. The ancient Jews sought to honor God by instituting the practice of saying *Adonay* (Lord) in lieu of speaking His name when reading the Bible out loud. This custom was introduced

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with the reasoning that God's name is too holy and sacred to be uttered.

Centuries later, Jewish scribes started writing the vowels "a,o,a" for *Adonay* (Hebrew spelling; Strong's H-136)¹ in between the letters YHWH as a means to remind readers to say "Lord" and to keep anyone from accidentally saying "Yahweh." The end result was creating a new word — *YaHoWaH*. The Jews never spoke *YaHoWaH*, since it was simply a literary construct used to prompt the reader to say "Adonay" (Lord) instead of "Yahweh."

Many years later, Christian scribes who were unaware of the reason *YaHoWaH* came to be in existence started speaking the word as the name of God and using it in their own writings. This eventually gets translated into the English word *Jehovah*.

Most translations of the Bible, both modern and old, translate the name of God in the Old Testament as *LORD* or *GOD* fully capitalized. So when people read their Bible, they do not read *Yahweh*, they read *LORD* or *GOD*. Century after century and millennia after millennia readers of the Bible have been captured by this ancient tradition erasing the knowledge of God's name and its meaning from generations of believers.

Just like the experience between Jesus and the religious leaders discussed in the previous chapter, this tradition prohibiting the speaking of God's name followed the same pattern. First came the bad doctrine instructing people to do something contrary to God's Word. Second came the justification from a verse of the Bible taken out of

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context. In this case, the bad doctrine came from the Jewish leaders who taught that the people shouldn't say God's name. Their explanation for their doctrine included misapplying the following verse to validate their reasoning for restricting the speaking of Yahweh:

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

– Exodus 20:7

Let's do something together which I hope you will put into practice with every doctrine you hear or have learned. Let's search the Scriptures to see if this doctrine is true (Acts 17:11).

Does the verse above instruct us not to say God's name? The answer is an absolute "no." Exodus 20:7 doesn't restrict us to *SPEAK* the name Yahweh in vain, rather, it instructs us not to *TAKE* Yahweh's name in vain. Strong's defines the Hebrew word translated as "vain" to mean emptiness, falsehood, and worthlessness of conduct.² The verse tells us not to take Yahweh our God in emptiness, falsely, or insignificantly.

That verse has significantly more spiritual meaning and importance than a simple restriction on speaking His name in a cursing or in an unholy manner. We should definitely not do those two things, but there is much more to that verse. That verse is warning people to not choose to be in a covenant relationship with God in vain.

When somebody follows God, they take His name upon themselves. Just like Christians take the name of Jesus

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upon themselves, followers of God take His name as well. The Bible makes the point that people who obey God's commandments and walk in His way will be called by the name Yahweh (Deuteronomy 28:9, 10). If someone does this in vain, then God will hold that person as guilty. However, if someone takes Yahweh as God in truth and sincerity, then God will hold that person as innocent.

In contrast to the ancient tradition restricting the speaking of God's name, we are repeatedly directed to speak God's name throughout the Bible. We are told to sing praises to His name (2 Samuel 22:50), declare His name (Psalm 22:22 NKJV), call upon His name (Isaiah 12:4), and bless His name (Psalm 103:1). Moses' song includes the phrase, "For I will proclaim the name of Yahweh" (Deuteronomy 32:3).

Not only are we instructed to speak, bless, praise, sing, proclaim, declare, and call upon His name, we are also instructed to swear by His name:

It is the LORD your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and **by his name you shall swear** [EMPHASIS MINE].

– Deuteronomy 6:13

When people testify in court, they are directed to put their left hand on a Bible, raise their right hand, and swear "to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." This practice originates from a commandment of God to swear by the name Yahweh. If someone swore by His name and lied, that person profaned

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God's name (Leviticus 19:12) and would receive the punishment of death (Leviticus 24:16).

How often have you heard *hallelujah* spoken in church? I'm guessing you probably said it many times yourself. If you have, you have spoken the name of God. The Hebrew word *halal* (hallel) means to praise, and *Jah* is the shortened name of God. Together the word *hallelujah* means — praise Yahweh.

In addition to the 6,519 times YHWH occurs in the Old Testament, the shortened name of God ("Jah") occurs 49 times. Not only are we instructed to say God's name, but many prophets had God's name as a part of their own name:

Joshua – "Yah(weh) is salvation"

Nehemiah – "Yah(weh) comforts"

Isaiah – "Yah(weh) has saved"

Jeremiah – "Yah(weh) has appointed"

Obadiah – "servant of Yah(weh)"

Elijah – "Yah(weh) is God"

Zephaniah – "Yah(weh) has treasured"

Zechariah – "Yah(weh) remembers"

Did you know non-worshippers of God are recorded in the Bible as knowing who Yahweh is by name? The Queen of Sheba traveled to investigate the notoriety of Solomon "concerning the name of Yahweh" (1 Kings 10:1). Balak, king of the Moabites, asked a soothsayer, "What has Yahweh spoken?" (Numbers 23:17). Psalms 102:15 states the

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nations (Gentiles, heathen) will fear the name of Yahweh. Think about how difficult it is for the nations today to fear the name Yahweh when most of His worshippers do not know His name.

The overwhelming evidence presented here against the ancient tradition included a representative sample of many verses in the Bible directing people to call out His name. Additionally, many of the prophets had God's name *Jah* included within their own names. In most churches today, people are still praising God's name unwittingly by saying, "hallelujah." Finally, we even read a commandment directing people to swear by His name. We have established biblically that God never intended for His people to be forbidden to speak His name.

THE MEANING OF YAHWEH

Since we have determined the doctrine restricting the speaking of God's name to be contrary to the Bible, let's set both the doctrine and the tradition aside and stand firm upon the Word of God. Let's reconnect God's people with His name.

What does God's name mean? To resolve this, let us go back to Exodus when Moses turned to see the burning bush in the mountain. God calls out to Moses from inside the bush and tells Moses that He is the God of his fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God then tells Moses He is going to send him to Egypt to deliver the children of Israel from their bondage. Moses asks God how he should answer if the Israelites ask him what His name is. God replies:

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God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

— Exodus 3:14

God responds in Exodus 3:14 in the first person singular form of the Hebrew word *hāyâ*, pronounced *haw-yaw*. Strong's Concordance defines *hāyâ* as — to be; in existence.³ In the first person singular, the word means — I will be; I am. The name of God truly means "I am the existing one."

Next, God tells Moses, "Say this to the people of Israel: Yahweh, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations" (Exodus 3:15). *Yahweh* is the third person form of *haya* meaning — he will be; he is the existing one. God instructed Moses to tell the Israelites that His name is *He Is The Existing One*.

The psalmist expressed his admiration and reverence for God's eternal nature when he wrote, "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Psalm 90:2). Everlasting is as long of a period of time as we have in our vernacular, but the psalmist uses the word "everlasting" in the context of describing the extremes of both the past and future of God's existence. Yahweh is from everlasting past to everlasting future.

Isaiah connects the everlasting nature of God with His name writing:

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For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, **who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy**: [EMPHASIS MINE] "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.

— Isaiah 57:15

Have you ever stopped and truly thought about how God never had a beginning? Have you tried to wrap your mind around the idea that there was never a time when God was not? How is that possible? We have no reference point to lean upon in trying to comprehend how it works, but the eternal nature of God and His existence is what makes Him God. He has always been, He is the Creator of everything, He is the life-giver, and He is God!

When I consider what it means that God has always existed without a beginning or an end and I compare His eternal existence to how fragile and short my life is in comparison, I feel great awe and majesty towards Him. God becomes incredibly large in my eyes, and I become very small. I think this reaction has been lost on generations of people who were never taught the meaning of Yahweh.

God told Isaiah, "I am Yahweh; that is my name" (Isaiah 42:8). God associates His name with His character and attributes. God proclaimed to Moses on Mount Sinai, "Yahweh, Yahweh God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth" (Exodus 34:6 KJV). God values His name in the same way He values His Word — "for you have exalted above all things your name and your word" (Psalm 138:2).

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One name that God puts above all other names is *Jesus* (Philippians 2:9). Scripture says that God “bestowed” upon Jesus the name given to Him. The English word *Jesus* comes from the transliteration (transferring a word from the alphabet of one language to another) of the Greek word *iēsous*. *iēsous* is the Greek translation of the Aramaic word *Yeshua*, meaning salvation. *Yeshua* is the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew word *y^hôšûa*, meaning — Yahweh is salvation.⁴ The name *Jesus* means the *salvation of Yahweh*, and it is the name above all other names!

I hope that in addition to having a profound new appreciation of the meanings of both God’s name and Jesus’ name, you also see the error of the ancient religious tradition and the harm generated from it. Jesus said to the Pharisees, “Many such things (false doctrines and false traditions) you do” (Mark 7:13). As demonstrated by this chapter, modern day church is not exempt from false doctrines and false traditions. I believe we have many more faulty doctrines and traditions than at any time before, and some of these erroneous doctrines and traditions have the severe consequence of giving people a false assurance of their eternal state.

Let’s be deliberate in allowing critical challenges to what we have been taught and believe. Let’s duplicate the practice we performed together of analyzing traditions and doctrines and seeking confirmation or correction from the Bible. Let’s have an open heart to hear what God’s Word says about some widely held modern-day Christian doctrines and traditions. Let’s search the Scriptures together to see if they are true (Acts 17:11).

GOD'S NAME

APPLICATION

It was decades into my walk with God before I became aware of God's name and its meaning. After learning His name and its meaning, I was stunned to discover it is mentioned over 6,000 times in the Old Testament.

- Did you fully know God's name and meaning before reading this chapter?
- Have you asked others and found they were unaware of His name and meaning?
- Do you see the power of tradition in erasing the name of God from the lips of millions of His followers?
- Be a change in your church or groups by reading Yahweh whenever you see LORD or GOD (fully capitalized) in your Bible.
- Speak His name in your prayers and praise.
- Expose the falsehood of the tradition handed down by church elders.

7

Doctrines

Before you can have a tradition, you must first have a doctrine. As noted several times earlier in this book, a doctrine is simply a particular principle or position which is taught. A doctrine handed down from one generation to another marks the beginning of a tradition. Bad or false doctrines which are not challenged or corrected take root to produce bad or false traditions. Over long periods of time, bad or false traditions become widely accepted as true and end up corrupting by contamination many other truths within the Bible.

Through my time in ministry, I have been able to be involved with a wide array of churches and ministries crossing multiple denominations. A common tactic taken whenever a subject is raised exposing opposing doctrinal beliefs between participants is to quickly dismiss discussing the issue for the sake of maintaining unity. Without hesitation or consideration of unintended consequences, purity and truth are quickly sacrificed at the altar of keeping harmony. This course of action is suggested as something noble and to be lauded, while challenging doctrinal beliefs is painted as menial and divisive.

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I have also witnessed numerous occasions where men in leadership have attempted to shut down any discussion involving doctrinal differences by falsely presenting Jesus as having never participated in such disputes during His ministry on earth. That argument in itself is patently false as we have demonstrated in our examination of Mark 7 (Chapter 5 of this book). Jesus had several interactions with religious leaders in which He was direct, forceful, and argumentative (John 8; Mark 7; Matthew 23; Luke 20). Jesus did not avoid altercations with religious leaders, nor did He dismiss false doctrines as unimportant, rather He often had harsh encounters with religious leaders in which He bluntly corrected their false doctrines.

The King James Version records Jesus telling his disciples to “beware” ten times in the gospels. Oxford Languages English Dictionary defines beware as — *to be cautious and alert to the dangers of*. On seven of the ten occasions, Jesus is clearly and specifically telling his audience to be cautious and alert to the dangers of the actions and doctrines of the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Scribes (religious leaders). In two of the remaining three mentions of Jesus saying “beware” in the gospels, one could make a strong case that they were also directed towards the religious leaders (“false prophets” Matthew 7:15; “men...deliver you up...synagogues” Matthew 10:17 NKJV). Through these passages, Jesus is alerting us about dangers deriving from those in positions of authority regarding the interpretation and implementation of Scripture. In today’s world, these people would include pastors, Bible teachers, and other ministry leaders.

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Some of Jesus's explicit warnings regarding the religious leaders included hypocrisy (Luke 12:1; 20:46), covetousness (Luke 12:15; 20:46), feigned or insincere worship (Luke 20:46) and doctrine (Matthew 16:12). Jesus' warnings imply that you and I should be attentive and vigilant for hypocrisy, covetousness, insincere worship, and false doctrine in our religious leaders.

The one particular occurrence I would like to drill into further is Jesus' warning about the religious leaders' doctrine in Matthew 16:12. In verse 6 of the same chapter, Jesus says to the disciples, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees." The disciples start to reason among themselves about what Jesus meant and concluded He was upset because they didn't bring any bread along for their trip. Jesus perceives the disciples' lack of understanding and lets them know He wasn't talking about literal bread by reminding them of the miracles He performed in feeding the thousands of people in the wilderness. Next, we read where the disciples come to realize what Jesus truly meant:

Then understood they how that he bade [them] not beware of the leaven of bread, but of the **doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees** [EMPHASIS MINE].

– Matthew 16:12 (KJV)

Do not let familiarity of the verse cloak the significance of what Jesus is communicating. Jesus is saying false doctrines can breed hazards and peril. Doctrinal differences are not trivial, insignificant, nor harmless, as many churches dismissively characterize them. Jesus is

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telling us the complete opposite. He is signifying that bad doctrine, like leaven, contaminates the whole lump of truth. Jesus wants us to “beware” (to be alert and cautious to the dangers) of the teachings of religious leaders so as to avoid spiritual and eternal harms.

When I was a young boy, I got bit by a German Shepherd dog. This event caused me to be very cautious of strange dogs, especially the bigger ones. When I heard an aggressive barking dog, I was mindful of the potential danger if I continued walking in a territory the dog was protecting, and I would take corrective action immediately by altering the direction of my path.

A few years later, I got a job delivering classified booklets called *Penny Savers* to homes in my neighborhood. I would receive a large stack of *Penny Savers*, fold them, put them into a plastic envelope containing a door knob hole at the top, store them on the handlebars of my bike, and deliver them door to door. Whenever I approached a house with a yard sign that read “BEWARE OF DOG,” I would take the warning very seriously. My fight or flight instincts would kick-in. I would intently scan the property to see if there was an open door or gate where this dangerous dog could possibly get out. If my visibility was obstructed with trees, bushes, or cars, I would just skip that house and move on to the next one.

I received the warning of potential danger which the sign expressed regarding the dog and took preventative action to not be harmed. The point I’m trying to make is that we are instructed by Jesus to diligently BEWARE of false doctrines in the same way as when I saw the BEWARE OF

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DOG sign. There are real and eternal dangers produced by false doctrines causing many people to miss the kingdom of God.

Paul makes a similar warning regarding some religious leaders, describing their actions as “peddling” the Word of God (2 Corinthians 2:17 NKJV). David Guzik’s commentary on the verse expands on Paul’s description of the word “peddling” writing, “The word ‘peddling’ has the idea of adulterating or watering down for gain, and was especially used of a wine seller who watered down the wine for bigger profits.”¹ Paul is insinuating that “many” religious leaders water down the Word of God for gain. The gain sought by religious leaders can take many different forms, but such examples of gain would most assuredly include influence, power, membership, and financial benefits.

Paul’s writings are filled with warnings to us about false doctrine, along with reasons why we should be alert to its presence. An example of one of Paul’s warnings include:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles **contrary to the doctrine** that you have been taught; avoid them.

For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery **they deceive the hearts of the naive.** [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Romans 16:17, 18

There is much to discuss in those two verses. First, take notice of the seriousness and urgency in the tone of Paul’s communication. Observe his sober and earnest plea

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to the readers when he wrote, “I appeal to you, brothers.” Paul wants our full attention on what he is saying and pleads for us to take a preventative course of action. At the risk of sounding repetitive, Paul’s language here refutes suggestions that doctrinal disputes are trivial and unimportant.

Secondly, Paul gives us an imperative instruction which is to “watch out” for people who are “contrary to the doctrine...taught” and to “avoid them.” In order to recognize a contrary doctrine, one must first have knowledge of the correct doctrine. Scripture is our source for determining if doctrine is true or not. We are to identify if someone is teaching contrary to what the Bible actually states and avoid those people.

Thirdly, Paul identifies “divisions” as a serious repercussion from false doctrines. Unfortunately, many religious leaders misuse this verse to vilify those people who want to correct false doctrine by labeling them as divisive. They imply that the action of challenging a false doctrine is the thing which is divisive. However, a casual look into Christendom immediately reveals that the opposite is manifestly evident. There are approximately 45,000 Christian denominations² in the world today putting on full display the fragmented state of the church. The division in the body of believers can be primarily sourced to doctrinal differences.

At the introduction of both of Paul’s letters to his two main lieutenants in ministry, Paul instructs them to diligently guard against false doctrines and to *rebuke* (express sharp disapproval) those who teach or act

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accordingly. Paul instructs Titus to, “...hold firm to the *trustworthy word* as taught...to give instruction in sound doctrine and also *to rebuke those who contradict it*” (Titus 1:9). Paul writes to Timothy, “As I urged you...that you may charge some that they *teach no other doctrine*, nor give heed to fables...which cause disputes...” (1 Timothy 1:3, 4 NKJV). Again, let me reiterate this very important detail —

False doctrines deceive the hearts of the naïve.

the false doctrine is the instrument of division, not the individual who addresses it.

The final point I would like to draw from the Romans passages is the stated purpose of false doctrines — “they *deceive* the hearts of the naïve.” False doctrines deceive people from the truth. There are various motives, both innocently misguided and nefarious, of why people teach false doctrine, but the end result of deception is a constant. Paul echoes the coupling of false doctrine with deception in his letter to the Ephesians:

so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by **every wind of doctrine**, by human cunning, by craftiness in **deceitful** schemes [EMPHASIS MINE].

— Ephesians 4:14

THE DECEIVER

Merriam Webster defines deception as — *the act of causing someone to accept as true or valid what is false or invalid*. The Bible tells us that Satan is a deceiver of the

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whole world (Revelation 12:9). Satan is actively deceiving people today in churches all over the world in order to stop them from giving their whole lives to God. We are told the Devil blinds the minds of unbelievers to keep them from being saved (2 Corinthians 4:3) and uses “...all wicked *deception*” for that purpose (2 Thessalonians 2:10). Satan’s influence is acutely aimed at people who are contemplating coming to God with a goal of deceiving them with false teaching into a powerless form of godliness instead of a true relationship with Him.

The Bible also informs us that Satan “deceived” Eve from the very beginning (2 Corinthians 11:3 NKJV). The deception started with a misquote of God’s commandment regarding the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. What Satan misquoted of God to Eve sounded very similar to what God actually said, but Satan’s version was the complete opposite of what He really said (Genesis 3:1 vs Genesis 2:16). After Satan successfully puts doubt into Eve’s mind about what God said, he then moves to teach her lies (false doctrine) about God and His character (John 8:44). He *deceived* Eve into disobeying God’s commandment by making her believe that she was doing something that would make her godly or “like God” (Genesis 3:5).

Satan’s deception of the world, including you and me, begins in the same manner as what occurred with Eve. In order to get you and I to sin, Satan must put doubt into our minds about God’s Word and lie to us about His existence, attributes, or will. Just because you and I enter a church doesn’t mean Satan will be hampered in his effort to deceive us. He was successful in deceiving Eve while she

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was residing in a sinless paradise environment in which she experienced God more tangibly than any of us have ever been able to do in this sinful world. Satan's main effort is to water down, twist, diminish, and distort God's Word to impede anyone from completely following Jesus with their whole heart (discipleship).

E.W Bullinger remarked about Satan's sphere being focused on those who taught the Bible:

"The history of Genesis 3 is intended to teach us the fact that Satan's sphere of activities is in the religious sphere, and not the spheres of crime or immorality; that his battlefield is not the sins arising from human depravity, but the unbelief of the human heart. We are not to look for Satan's activities today in the newspaper press, or the police courts; but in the pulpit, and in professors' chairs. Wherever the Word of God is called in question, there we see the trail of 'that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan.'"³

Satan's audacity included tempting Jesus three times in the wilderness with the very same method he uses against you and me. Satan tried to get Jesus to act in His own self-interest and contrary to God's will by misrepresenting God's Word to Jesus. In the first temptation, Satan misquoted God's statement, "This is my beloved Son" (Matthew 3:17) by saying to Jesus, "*If you are the Son of God*" (Matthew 4:3). Satan's language is barely different than what God said, but it implied what God said was not true and was intended to produce doubt. The objective of his temptation was to get Jesus to quit His fast, which was building Jesus up spiritually, and to satisfy a

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fleshly desire to eat. Most false doctrines will seek to cover fleshly lusts with the cloak of God's approval and permission.

Satan's second temptation of Jesus was a continuation of the first. He repeated, "*If you are the Son of God,*" and tried to get Jesus to prove who He is by enticing Him to jump off the top of the Temple (Matthew 4:6). Satan misused Scripture (Psalms 91:11, 12) to imply that God promised He would send angels to rescue Jesus from harm should He jump. Take note of the Devil's tactic of twisting Scripture to make it appear as if God approved of Jesus taking an action to satisfy a selfish desire.

Satan's third temptation of Jesus is one every single person has experienced. Satan offered Jesus a worldly reward if He would worship "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4). In Satan's tempting of Eve, he alluded to her that she would become an equal to God in this world. When Eve chose to disobey God by eating the fruit from the forbidden tree, her worship went from God to another (herself, Adam, Satan, the world, etc.).

Every time you or I willingly choose to disobey God for a selfish worldly satisfaction, we are worshipping that thing, which the Bible labels *idols*. Popular idols include children, careers, money, popularity, men, women, sex, drugs, and self. Satan doesn't advocate for you to worship himself or any specific idol. Satan's sole pursuit is to pervert the Word of God to get us out of God's will. False doctrines often mask disobedience to God as something good and righteousness.

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If Satan worked this hard to tempt Jesus, why would anyone think a church goer would escape Satan's focus or be immune to his deceit? Why should we let our guard down simply because we walk through the doors of a church? We must be alert to Satan's tactic of distorting the Word of God through false teaching in our pulpits. Not only does the Bible tell us we should expect people to turn to false doctrines, but we should expect to see it increasing in frequency:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, [because] they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers;

and they will turn [their] ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.

– 2 Timothy 4: 3, 4 (NKJV)

Paul tells Timothy people will “turn their ears away from the truth” for their “own desires.” The remedy for the sickness of false teaching is truth. What is truth? Truth is Jesus (John 14:6) and God's Word (John 17:17). By the Word of God we will be sanctified or cleansed from the impurity of false teaching which leads to disobedience to God.

Jesus disciplined each one of us by showing us how to combat Satan. Jesus responded to each of Satan's three temptations with “It is written...” (Matthew 4:4, 6, 7) and quoted God's Word accurately and in context. Jesus sought God's will and glory, and He never once considered His own personal wants, needs, or honor. Since we are disciples of Jesus, we should follow His example by seeking God's will

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and glory over our own. We must look into God's Word for what "is written" regarding God's will in all areas of our lives.

To truly seek God's will over self-will means that you have humbled your heart to Him. Once you have sincerely done that, then the exciting part comes into play. You can read His pure and holy Word with an expectation that everything He says will come to fruition (Isaiah 55:11). Because you search His Word with a heart for truth, I believe a fountain of eagerness and excitement will spring forth in your soul as you discover God's immense love for you and His desire to bless and protect you (Hebrews 11:6; Jeremiah 29:11).

The King James Version records that Jesus' doctrine was "with power" (Luke 4:32). Unlike the form of godliness spoken of in 2 Timothy 3:5, one should expect to experience the power of God in one's life when submitting to and following Jesus' teaching. Jesus declared the religious leaders had erred "because ye know not the scriptures, neither the power of God" (Mark 12:24 KJV). The religious leaders had a greater comprehensive education of the Scriptures than most citizens of Israel, but those leaders didn't really know God or His Word. They manipulated the Scriptures to serve their own interests and never sought to truly seek God and His will for their lives. They never opened up their hearts to Him.

The effect on these religious leaders from their lack of knowing the Scriptures is that they will not experience God's power in their lives. They will not have victory over Satan, sin, death, and so many other bondages and tribulations from this sinful world. Because these religious

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leaders do not humble their hearts to the will of God, they will not partake of His blessings, provision, and salvation.

TRUE DOCTRINE'S POWER SAVED MY MARRIAGE

Jesus proclaimed "If anyone's will is to do God's will," then that person will know the doctrine of God (John 7:17). I want to share a testimony of a powerful and life changing experience in my own life that occurred because I sought to do God's will over my own will. It was early into my second marriage, and my wife and I were already in desperate despair. The strain on our marriage was so serious, only our mutual concern for our daughter's welfare and my desire to follow Jesus were keeping it from breaking. We were two individuals living separate lives within the same house.

The tension between us was extremely severe. My wife and I were invited by our church's new pastor to participate in a group so he could get to know volunteers in the church and build his leadership team. We were so bad off that she and I would drive separately to the pastor's house just so we wouldn't have to talk to each other along the way. We would put on a mask of a loving couple over our relationship for the benefit of the group and return home afterwards unchanged from how we arrived.

One week, the pastor arranged for the women to meet together at his house with his wife, while the men were to meet with him at one of the other participant's house. The pastor was speaking about the need for men to lead their wives, when I smacked my hand down on the end table and jumped up off the couch as if I had just spilled hot

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coffee on myself. I shouted, “How are you supposed to do that?!” My outcry revealed the heavy burden which I was carrying in our marriage and hiding behind the mask of our relationship. I had been trying to lead my family to God and make the numerous changes in our lives in accordance with His commandments, but I always ended up battling my wife in every detail and decision. How could I possibly lead my wife when she was the obstinate resistance to me in leading my family to God?

I didn’t get any meaningful answers from the pastor or the group that evening, but something significant happened. I came to a complete end of myself in the matter of our marriage. I went home resigned to the fact that unless God did something amazing, I was about ready to be divorced...AGAIN! Unlike my first marriage, I wasn’t going to make any decisions based upon my logic, emotions, or abilities. I wanted to hear from God and seek His will for me, my wife, and our marriage.

As soon as I got home, I picked up a topical Bible, took it to my room, and closed the door. I turned to the “M” section and started reading everything listed about marriage. Eventually, I was led to the “H” section to read about husbands. This topic study led me to the following verse in Ephesians 5:

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it;

– Ephesians 5:25

When I read that verse, I heard God speak to me, “Why don’t you reverse that? Have Jesus love you the way

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you have been loving Danielle.” Those two sentences stopped me in my tracks. I was deeply convicted, realizing I had been loving my wife very conditionally. When she was not pleasing me with her actions, decisions, and attitude, I withdrew my love, care, and concern for her. My love for Danielle was very selfish, and I couldn’t imagine how I could ever receive Jesus’ love under the same terms and conditions which I extended to my wife.

I immediately repented and accepted the instruction that I was called to die (“gave Himself”) for my wife in similar manner as Jesus died for the church. To me, that meant I would start by doing everything I expected her to do around the house but was failing to do. Chores of cleaning dishes and doing laundry were sacrifices I would make for her. Taking the responsibility of homeschooling our girls would be a sacrifice I would make for her. No longer would I do these items passive aggressively, but rather I would do them with a servant’s heart to help relieve a burden from my wife. I quit looking at her through my eyes and being disappointed by unmet expectations, and I transitioned to seeing her through Jesus’ eyes and loving her unconditionally.

This was only the beginning of the changes God would make in me for the sake of our marriage. Time after time and issue after issue, God would continue to lead me in dying to myself for the benefit of my wife. Whenever I would start to think of how good she might have it being married to me and start to feel like I’m owed something in return, God would remind me how far below the standard of Jesus I was in comparison. Although those selfish

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thoughts have reappeared several times since then, they have lost any footing for becoming a stronghold and are quickly cast down in obedience to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).

What I'm hoping to relay through this testimony is the power of God available to those who follow Jesus and His doctrine. When I sought God's will in my marriage, I was walking out what Jesus said in John 7:17. Because I chose to follow God's will instead of my will, I heard Him speak to me through Ephesians 5:25. I walked out in obedience of Jesus' teaching, and my marriage was radically changed for the better. Through the "doctrine" of Jesus, I experienced the power of God!

My marriage is now in its 18th year, and my wife is so much closer to God than ever before. My wife is free from anxiety about the future of her marriage or concerns about the prospect of being divorced. She is completely unburdened by trying to earn the love of her husband and has consistently shared her appreciation for how I have provided for her both materially and spiritually. My wife lives with peace and joy from God's blessings over our home and family.

Our youngest daughter has thrived in the stability of a two-parent home in which God is Lord. McKenzie just had her 17th birthday and still shares every part of her life with her mom and me. She is joyous in all areas of her life and readily seeks godly wisdom for big decisions and for navigating tribulations. We are blessed with a home in which the parents love being around their daughter and the daughter loves being around her parents.

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All of this comes from the power of God through the doctrines of Jesus. My family life is absolutely an example of the “effect” of God’s commandments. My daughter’s spiritual eternity is standing on a solid foundation because I followed Jesus’ teaching during the grimmest of circumstances. The multiple blessings we have encountered in our family over the years are completely attributable to the love and power of Jesus Christ and His doctrines.

Contrast the testimony I just shared of all the blessings from following Jesus’ doctrine instructing husbands to love their wives unconditionally with the chaos, destruction, and pain so often experienced when divorce separates families. There are numerous times I’ve heard people misuse Scripture to justify divorce as an option. I cannot imagine what my life would be like if I had sought my own will over God’s will. My heart breaks to contemplate where my daughter and my wife would be in this world had I left the marriage. I shudder to think of where their eternal destination would be had I sought my own will over God’s will.

All of this derived from one decision I made years ago. One specific doctrine which I followed with my whole heart produced an amazing amount of fruit of which I’ve only touched the surface. There are many more testimonies of times I’ve followed Jesus’ teaching and have received a corresponding blessing from God. Each one occurred because I submitted my will (emotions, desire, feelings, decision making, etc.) to God’s will. I sought to follow Jesus whenever I came across a fork in the road of life.

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I had a Bible instructor who would start many of his classes by reading what Paul said about the Bereans, “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11 KJV). The Bereans were more noble than the others because they would hear the teaching with great eagerness, but they would *search the Scriptures* to see if what they were taught was true. My instructor would say that his class should apply the same standard to his teaching that the Bereans did to their teachers.

Each one of us should apply the same instruction when we attend church or any other occasion where someone is preaching or teaching the Bible. We should be aware that much false doctrine is being taught inside churches. This awareness shouldn’t manifest within us as a gotcha attitude. Rather, we should simply be on guard that false doctrines are real, are in the church, and have a dangerous spiritual and material effect. We should eagerly and attentively receive the preaching, but we should search the Bible to see if what was taught lines up with the Word of God. If the doctrine does not line up with the Bible, then it is wrong and powerless. That is what Jesus meant when He said that the traditions (doctrines of man) made the Word of God of no effect (powerless).

A false doctrine is an untruth, and therefore, it cannot be of Jesus Christ. Bad doctrine opposes the true doctrine of God. God’s doctrine has power whereas the opposing doctrine does not. There is power in the Word of

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God, and we should not deviate away from anything it says to do, or not do.

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APPLICATION

- How serious do you take God's Word when you teach?
 - Are you alert to incorrect teaching of God's Word?
 - Have you ever heard anyone impede a spiritual conversation by labeling the topic as trivial or divisive doctrine?
 - Have you ever changed your belief about a doctrine you were previously taught after being convicted reading the Bible?
-
- Challenge every church doctrine you believe by reading all the Bible and seeing if what was taught to you is true (Acts 17:11).
 - Understand that this exercise may put you into a minority opinion within your church or religious group.
 - More importantly, commit to living out the true doctrine of Jesus and expect to experience the power of God in your life and ministry.

8

Repentance

We discussed in chapter 6 how antiquity can deceptively surround church traditions with the appearance of a wall of infallibility (the inability to be wrong). The older the tradition is, the more venerated it becomes, causing those who are being taught such traditions to accept them as true without investigation or challenge.

We have also discussed how, conversely, the Bible teaches us to search the Scriptures (Acts 17:11) to see if what is being taught is actually true. We examined how Jesus points us to the Scriptures as the source of truth (“it is written...”) to battle Satan’s efforts to deceive us into serving self-will instead of God’s will. We explored how Jesus contrasted His true doctrine with that of the religious leaders who practiced and taught traditions emphasizing outward ceremonial cleansing instead of the inward cleansing of the heart.

Before we get to the main topic of this chapter, I would like to share with you a brief story of how I followed Jesus’ example of challenging an ancient doctrine by searching the Scriptures to see if it was true. My youngest daughter took a church history class a couple of years ago,

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and one of the required books to read was *Know the Creeds and Councils* by Justin S. Holcomb. In the book, the author surveys several of the earliest church creeds (formal statements of Christian beliefs) and councils analyzing their origin, content, and importance to us in the context of church history.

I have never been interested in studying or examining historical creeds or councils, but when I saw my daughter's book lying around the house, my curiosity led me to start reading it. I got to the chapter about the Athanasian Creed, and I came across a teaching which I believed the Bible clearly contradicts. The Athanasian Creed is historically esteemed, being the 5th oldest of those presented in this particular book (late 400s to early 500s). Like most of the creeds, the main topic under consideration dealt with the Trinity. The particular sentence that caught my attention was — “And in this Trinity, none is before, or after another; *none is greater, or less than another* [EMPHASIS MINE].”¹

In layman's terms, the specific teaching (doctrine) about the Trinity from this creed states Yahweh God (Father) is not greater than Jesus (Son of God) and the Holy Spirit. However, the Bible records Jesus making the complete opposite assertion saying “...for the Father *is greater* than I” (John 14:28). I do not intend to expound into all the intricacies dealing with the nature and workings of the Trinity, but I would like to contrast the claim from the creed with the truth of what Jesus said in John 14:28. There is no escaping the obvious conclusion that those two declarations conflict with each other.

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Jesus spoke several times demonstrating a deference to a *greater* eminence and prestige of the Father. Jesus said He could not do anything on His own accord, but He could only do what the Father does (John 5:19). Later, Jesus reiterated He could not do anything on His own judgment or will, but He only follows the Father's will and judgment (John 5:30). Jesus rebuked a certain ruler for calling Him good and said, "No one is good except God alone" (Luke 18:19). During the Olivet Discourse, Jesus is recorded saying, "But concerning that day or hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, *nor the Son*, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). All of these examples show a greater status, judgment, will, and knowledge possessed by the Father.

As a final piece of evidence to bolster Jesus' statement that the Father is greater than He is, let's take a deeper look at something Jesus prayed to the Father while He was in Gethsemane with His disciples:

And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw,
and knelt down and prayed,

saying, "Father, if you are willing, **remove this cup from me.** [EMPHASIS MINE] nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."

– Luke 22:41, 42

The cup, which Jesus was praying to be removed, was His forthcoming crucifixion and sacrificial death. Jesus was so distressed by the knowledge of the torture and suffering He would soon experience that "His sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground" (Luke

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22:44). Jesus' will of self-preservation was apparent in His three requests (Matthew 26:44) to God for the cup to be removed. However, Jesus knew that His will was in opposition to the Father's will for Jesus to die an excruciating death as the sacrificial Lamb for all mankind. In submitting His will to the Father's will, Jesus was acknowledging a *greater* (higher) authority.

The purpose of why I shared this with you is so that you can visualize a road map for challenging other ancient church traditions from my experience with the creed. First, I identified a doctrine (the particular statement regarding the Trinity) from our church elders and sought the Scriptures to see if that statement was true. I found several passages in which Jesus spoke contrary to that particular doctrine, including Jesus saying conclusively and plainly that the Father is *greater* than He is. Finally, I cast down the doctrine of the elders presented in the creed as false and held firm to what Jesus said in John 14:28 as true.

CHALLENGING A TRADITION

Now that we have taken down one tradition of the elders, I endeavor to lead you to confront another. This next tradition will challenge much of what you have been taught. I was reading *The Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and felt like God put a serious check in my spirit to the following sentence about Martin Luther: "In the depth of his misery, Luther had grasped by faith the *free and unconditional forgiveness* of all his sins."² I was many months into the preparation of this book dealing with the

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topic of false doctrines regarding salvation, and I knew immediately in my spirit that God identified this teaching as a tradition used to deceive many people coming to God.

Over many years, I have witnessed a large segment of people within the church struggling with sin, and I often wrestled within my spirit to understand why. The culmination of the search for an answer came when God revealed to me, after reading the quote from Bonhoeffer, that this tradition is the source for many other false doctrines. The teaching of unconditional forgiveness of sins has contaminated so much of what the Bible has to say about salvation, and its fingerprints are littered on much of the deception inside the church.

Many churches have taught, incorrectly, a forgiveness of sins by God without *repentance*. These churches have neglected to accurately teach God's covenant with mankind and His terms (conditions) for that covenant with Him. Conversely, they have either explicitly or implicitly propagated the false doctrine of free and unconditional forgiveness of sins by God. In churches all across the country sit people who have been assured by a church leader that they are saved because they repeated a salvation script from a preacher, yet they have never repented of their ways and given their whole heart to God.

I had a Bible study that evening in which I read the Bonhoeffer quote and remember hearing God tell me to ask the group if God's forgiveness of sins is free and unconditional. I anticipated this question and the responses would be a brief aside to our main study, but the passionate defenses from the group lasted the entire hour and a half.

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One by one, members of the study group made a fervent attempt to describe how there were no costs or conditions to God's forgiveness of sins. Although our study group contains members from several different denominations, all of the responses were unified in defending the tradition. One member was so upset by the challenge to the doctrine and his failure to adequately defend it, that he quit attending Bible study for several months.

I believe the Bible contradicts both adjectives used by Bonhoeffer ("free and unconditional") in his statement describing God's forgiveness, but I only focused on the unconditional adjective. For consideration by the Bible study group, I offered up *repentance* as a condition to receive God's forgiveness, but they still rejected the premise of any condition at all. A few at the Bible study would acknowledge that repentance was necessary, but would immediately revert back to their previous stance that God's forgiveness is free and unconditional.

Because most church people were brought up, or came to faith in God with this tradition, any truth in opposition is often immediately dismissed without investigation and passionately defended as if they were defending God Himself. This tradition of "free and unconditional" forgiveness of sins is rooted in a doctrine that over-emphasizes the following verses:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,
not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

— Ephesians 2:8, 9

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The common denominator for many of the defenses offered on behalf of the tradition of free and unconditional forgiveness of sins is the wrong assumption that any conditions to God's forgiveness would eliminate it from being both free and a gift. Some of you may have experienced a solicitation from a time-sharing development company with an enticing "free gift" such as a new TV, or a weekend stay at a resort, but the "free gift" is neither free, nor unconditional. In order to receive the gift, you will have to sit through a sales presentation for the time-sharing development (condition), and you will need to travel to the destination, which is typically in a different city (cost). Now, you didn't purchase the TV or the weekend stay at the resort, nor did you earn it, but the free gift was conditional and came at some travel costs (gas, food, etc.).

Similarly, God's free gift of forgiveness of sins can still come with a condition and contain a cost. There is not an amount one can pay to purchase His salvation, nor is there any way one can earn it. God's gift of salvation is free from both of those scenarios, however, the cost for anyone to receive His free gift is for that person to surrender his life to God as a free-will offering (Matthew 16:25; Luke 9:23, 24; Romans 12:1; Matthew 10:37, 38; Luke 14:26, 27).

I assert, contrary to Bonhoeffer, that repentance is a necessary condition for someone to receive God's free gift of forgiveness of sins, and I believe it to be overwhelmingly clear throughout the Bible, including in the Old Testament (Covenant). I would like to focus our efforts challenging the "unconditional" assertion made by Bonhoeffer and leave the "free" adjective for another day. Is God's gift

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unconditional, or is there something one must do in order to receive God's forgiveness? Let's search the Scriptures to see if repentance is that necessary condition to receiving God's free gift.

I would like to start with a verse I believe to be foundational to the premise of repentance being a necessary condition. Peter writes in his second epistle, "The Lord is not slack concerning [His] promise...not willing that any should perish but that *all should come to repentance*." (2 Peter 3:9 NKJV). This pivotal verse informs us that God doesn't want anyone to eternally die ("perish") and reveals repentance is the way for people to avoid it.

At Pentecost, a significantly large crowd gathered around due to the sound from heaven of the Holy Spirit descending on the disciples. Peter took the occasion of the amassing audience and preached to them about Jesus. At the conclusion of Peter's sermon, those who were convicted in their hearts cried out, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter responded saying, "*Repent* and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of sins*" (Acts 2:37, 38). Peter clearly revealed repentance as a condition to receiving forgiveness of sins (salvation). The Bible records 3,000 people were saved that day (Acts 2:41).

In the next chapter of Acts, God healed a lame man through Peter giving him another opportunity to preach about Jesus. As another large crowd gathered after seeing the miracle performed on the lame man, Peter accused the listeners of denying the Righteous One and killing the Author of life. He then gave them the necessary action to be saved by God saying, "*Repent*, therefore, and turn back,

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that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:19). The Bible records "about 5,000" people were saved (Acts 4:4). The condition for forgiveness of sins by God expressed by Peter in his first two sermons was repentance.

The Pharisees questioned Jesus' disciples about why He was hanging out with sinners, and Jesus responded saying that He came to call "*sinner*s to *repentance*" (Matthew 9:13 NKJV). The first mention of Jesus' preaching in the Gospel of Mark records Him saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; *repent* and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The twelve Apostles were dispatched by Jesus throughout the region, and they went two by two proclaiming "people should *repent*" (Mark 6:12). Jesus had plainly demonstrated as well as taught His disciples that people need to repent in order to receive the good news (Gospel) of God's forgiveness of sins.

In Luke's version of the Great Commission, we are told Jesus opened the understanding of the Scriptures to His disciples. Then He said, "*repentance* and remission (pardon or forgiveness) of sins should be preached in His name to all nations" (Luke 24:47 NKJV). We need to feel the weight of what Jesus had instructed His disciples to preach to the world. Jesus was succinct and specific in saying repentance is the necessary step people must take to be forgiven.

When Paul was detained in Caesarea, he was brought before King Agrippa to be examined by him prior to being sent to Caesar in Rome. During this interrogation, Paul revealed details of his vision of Jesus when he was traveling on the road to Damascus. Paul related to King Agrippa how Jesus stated the purpose for His appearance to

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Paul was so mankind “*may receive forgiveness of sins*” (Acts 26:18). So what did Paul do to fulfill the purpose Jesus gave him? Paul testified that he was obedient to the heavenly vision by declaring to all nations “that they should *repent* and turn to God” (Acts 26:19, 20).

When Paul was speaking to the Greeks at the Aeropagus in Athens, he told them God “commands all people everywhere *to repent...*” (Acts 17:30) “...because he has fixed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:31). Paul’s message to the Greeks was pointed in that if they do not repent, God will judge them for their unrighteousness. Paul also linked repentance and salvation in his epistle to the church of Corinth writing, “For godly sorrow produces *repentance* [leading] to *salvation*” (2 Corinthians 7:10 NKJV).

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So what is repentance? The Bible has much to say about repentance due to its significance with regards to man’s eternal salvation. Repentance has much more to its composition than a simple emotional feeling of sorrow. There are several important elements which must be present in the remorseful act of the sinner to qualify as biblical repentance.

The first feature of repentance I would like to introduce is the acknowledging of one’s evil deeds. During Solomon’s dedication of the Temple he prayed, “If they turn their heart...and *repent* and plead with you...saying, ‘*We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly*’” (1

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Kings 8:47). Admitting one's sinful ways and declaring those ways to be wrong is a key element of repenting. There are many additional passages in the Bible which convey God's mercy or forgiveness given to those who confess their sins (1 John 1:9; Proverbs 28:13; Psalm 32:5).

The second feature of repentance is the humbling of self. Job is confronted by God for finding fault, condemning, and arguing with Him (Job 40:2, 8). After two chapters of God asking Job if he could do an exhaustive list of things only God could do, Job immediately saw the error of his ways and responded to God saying, "Therefore *I despise myself, and repent*" (Job 42:6). Seeing oneself in comparison to the holy and perfect God is foundational in repentance. David wrote the following after repenting for his sin with Bathsheba: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; *a broken and contrite heart*, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). A "broken and contrite heart" means a deep and sincere humbling.

The third feature of repentance revolves around the Hebrew word *šûb*, which is translated "repent" — *turning back or returning back* (to God).³ God declared to Israel through the prophet Ezekiel saying, "Thus says the Lord GOD: *Repent and turn away* from your idols, and *turn away* your faces from all your abominations" (Ezekiel 14:6). Repenting is not just acknowledging your sin and humbling yourself, it includes turning away from previous actions and returning to God and His ways.

The final feature of repentance is that it must be whole-hearted. The heart of man in the Bible includes much more than the organ which pumps blood throughout

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your body. The Biblical meaning of heart includes man's desires, thoughts, will (choices and decisions), and emotions. It is the heart of man God searches to see if one's repentance is genuine and sincere. God spoke through Jeremiah saying, "They shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me (šûb) *with their whole heart*" (Jeremiah 24:7).

God's standard of whole-hearted repentance is repeated to the nation Israel through the prophet Joel:

"Yet even now," declares the LORD, "**return to me with all your heart**, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning;

and rend your hearts and not your garments."
Return to the LORD your God, [ALL EMPHASIS MINE] for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love; and he relents over disaster.

– Joel 2:12, 13

There is a sad encounter recorded in the Book of Jeremiah where God was comparing Israel to an adulteress woman. God used harsh language saying Israel played the "whore" by worshipping other gods and therefore He sent her away "with a certificate of divorce" (meaning they were conquered by the Assyrians) (Jeremiah 3:8 NKJV). Next, God remarked about Judah saying, "Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me (šûb) *with her whole heart*, but in pretense, declares the LORD" (v.10).

God will not accept half-hearted repentance. The Bible is littered with passages describing God searching the

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hearts of man and uses terms such as whole heart, perfect heart, all your heart, pure heart, true heart, and upright in heart. Conversely, the Bible records despairingly of King Amaziah as doing what God told him to do but not with a “whole heart” (2 Chronicles 25:2). God addressed the heart of Israel through Hosea saying, “Their heart is divided; Now they are held guilty” (Hosea 10:2 NKJV) signifying that one must have a complete heart for God in order to be accounted not guilty by Him.

Luke’s Gospel records Jesus contrasting the godly sorrow of a tax collector with an unrepentant religious leader. The prideful Pharisee (religious leader) compares himself to extortioners, the unjust, adulterers, and the tax collector rather than comparing himself to a holy and perfect God. He goes on bragging about his religious deeds of fasting and tithing. Meanwhile, the tax collector humbly beat his chest asking God for mercy. Jesus summarizes the eternal destination of the two men saying, “I tell you, this man (tax collector) went down to his house justified (salvation), rather than the other (religious leader)” (Luke 18:14).

I would like to end this chapter with one more example of repentance being a condition for salvation. There is this unique story which Jesus tells in Luke 16 about a rich man who dies and goes to Hades (Hell). There are differing opinions among scholars as to whether this story is a parable or an actual historical event. Either way, the story Jesus tells gives us the only first-hand account of someone in Hades.

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Jesus tells us the rich man, who is being tormented by flames, “lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off” (Luke 16:23). He asks Abraham to arrange for the beggar Lazarus (not the same Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead) to dip his finger in water to cool his tongue. Abraham responds saying there is a “great chasm” between them which neither of them can cross over. Realizing that he cannot obtain comfort for his anguish, the rich man seeks Abraham to go to his father’s house to warn his dad and his brothers to avoid the place of torment in which he resides. Abraham responds that his relatives already have the Scriptures to warn them about their eternal destination.

Now here comes the interesting part! The rich man replies, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will *repent*” (Luke 16:30). The man in Hell knew the condition for his family to receive God’s forgiveness of sins was to repent.

We have definitive evidence demonstrating that God’s forgiveness of man’s sins is subject to man wholeheartedly repenting for his ways. Peter preached repentance for salvation during the birth of the church. Paul wrote to many churches explicitly teaching them to preach repentance for salvation. The Gospels record Jesus preaching repentance for forgiveness, and His disciples are recorded preaching the same. Lastly, Jesus shared a story about a rich man in Hell who begs Abraham to advise his father and brothers to repent so they will not suffer the same judgement he does.

Any effort to present to a person an easier and more desirable path for receiving God’s forgiveness of sins other

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than biblical repentance jeopardizes that individual's eternal state. If churches teach unconditional forgiveness without repentance, they are presenting a wide and easy path that will lead people to eternal destruction of torment and anguish.

People need to hear the truth of what God requires of mankind in order to be forgiven. We need to stop the minimally intrusive invitations for people to get saved such as asking people to raise their hands with nobody looking around. We need to quit presenting canned prayers of repentance as an end all for an individual to be saved. We need godly leaders to speak truth to people about true repentance and go after the hearts of sinners.

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APPLICATION

- Were your beliefs challenged when reading about the tradition of unconditional forgiveness of sins?
- Have you experienced in others the difficulty in accepting that God does have conditions to His forgiveness of sins because of this tradition?
- Be bold in teaching or discipling others that true repentance of the heart is what God looks for to forgive sins.
- Consider that true repentance is not a one-time event, but rather, it is a lifetime commitment producing action of change in a person.
- Clearly contrast the common church invitation of a fleeting emotional response to a sermon with a whole-hearted repentance that surrenders a life back to God.

9

Baptism

You may have noticed in the previous chapter regarding the topic of repentance that I failed to include any references related to John the Baptist. I intentionally delayed mentioning him until now because I believe his ministry has been the most corrupted by church doctrine and tradition.

As you have progressed through this book, I am hoping you have developed an expectation of discovering more false doctrines and traditions in your beliefs which will need to be challenged biblically. I have consistently experienced firm resistance whenever I introduced a challenge to the traditional doctrine of baptism, and I have since discovered that many people passionately hold water baptism especially holy and essential to salvation. The traditional teaching regarding baptism is one of the more serious and consequential false teachings affecting one's eternal state with God, as well as a leading cause of spiritual corrosion within the church body as a whole. It is of paramount importance that we correct these false doctrines by searching Scripture to see what is true.

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Just weeks before writing this chapter I had two people from separate circumstances unconvincingly rationalize to me and to themselves of a loved one's location in heaven solely because their loved one had been water baptized. Even though the testimony of both of those individuals who passed away included a life of living for self in sin and had zero evidence of serving God or actively worshipping Him, these two people hesitantly claimed their loved one was with God in heaven. This belief is rooted in the tradition of *unconditional forgiveness of sins* and a faulty teaching on baptism.

Before we get started, let me affirm water baptism as something we should obediently do within the church. The Bible records John the Baptist saying to the crowd "I baptize you with water" several times (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 33). Matthew documents Jesus being water baptized by John the Baptist writing, "immediately He went up from the water" (Matthew 3:16). If Jesus participated in water baptism, we should as well. I am not suggesting at all that we abandon the practice of water baptism.

I am, however, going to suggest to you that water baptism is only a small part of the whole of John the Baptist's ministry. The primary core of John the Baptist's ministry is repentance, and water was simply used as an analogous tool of imagery to connect the physical with the spiritual aspect. Water baptism is a ceremonial metaphor of the spiritual cleansing when one fully repents to God similar to the physical cleansing one obtains when one is fully submerged in water. Unfortunately, many churches

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under the influence of tradition hold onto the ceremonial part of baptism and have abandoned the more important and necessary feature of repentance.

I grew up attending a Southern Baptist denomination church and have witnessed many baptisms in my life. As I mentioned previously, I had departed the faith late in my teenage years and returned to God at age 30. From that moment, I committed to submit my whole life to God, and it was soon afterwards I started to feel uneasy with how I was hearing baptism being taught. Although I didn't have understanding of what baptism really was at that time, I knew in my spirit there was much more than what was being communicated.

Soon afterwards, I began ministering in prison, jail, recovery houses, and churches. Occasionally, someone would ask me about baptism, and I would feel convicted as I relayed the same church traditional explanation in which I was repeatedly exposed to. Several instances would arrive in which someone would specifically request me to do their baptism, and I would feel an inadequate hollowness as I performed the ceremony. Although I didn't fully recognize it at the time, God was pressing me to seek His Word to ascertain the immense importance of total heart repentance.

The climax of God's conviction upon me regarding the tradition of baptism came years later during an evening of ministry at a prison in Malvern, Arkansas. My mentor in prison ministry, Chaplain Bradford, had recently retired, and a prison counselor had been hired to replace him. Once a month, Chaplain Bradford would do baptisms in the prison

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on an evening in which I volunteered to teach so I would be able to assist him with the work. Normally, we would baptize a handful of men on each occasion with the most being about ten or so. On this first month with the new chaplain, he had arranged for an extraordinary 120 men to be baptized.

This was a huge event inside this prison consisting of 300 total prisoners. The staff had to transport these men back and forth from their separate barracks to the location of the portable baptistery in waves in order to maintain security. This new chaplain, beaming with accomplishment of leading so many men to get baptized, asked me to perform the baptisms. I experienced overwhelming conviction as I baptized each of the 120 men, and I couldn't shake the feeling of emptiness as I was performing, what felt like to me, an impotent religious ceremony.

Furthermore, the discussions I heard from many of the men while they were waiting in line to get baptized, or while they were getting dressed afterwards, shocked me to the core. I heard vulgarness and sordid conversations which exposed unrepentant hearts inside. I actually remember thinking at the time that so many of these men are just as spiritually dirty coming out of the water as they were entering into it. I felt like a used-car salesman cheating an unsuspecting customer to purchase a vehicle that may not even last while it is being driven off the lot. I had such a sensation of dirtiness and shame, and I resolved to never do another baptism from that day forward in which I do not have the opportunity to visit with the individual beforehand.

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In addition, I sought diligently what the Bible had to say regarding baptism. This endeavor was the beginning of a long road of God teaching me about His covenant with man. God instituted circumcision as the “token” of the old covenant between man and Himself (Genesis 17:11 KJV), however, the “token” of circumcision had no power in itself to save mankind. The Bible speaks often about physical circumcision being ineffectual to the saving of one’s soul and pointedly states that a person’s *heart* is what needs to be circumcised (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4).

In Paul’s definitive work on the doctrine of salvation he elaborated regarding circumcision:

For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

But a Jew is one inwardly, **and circumcision is a matter of the heart**, [EMPHASIS MINE] by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

– Romans 2:28, 29

Similar to circumcision being the *token* of the old covenant between man and God, water baptism also functions as the *token* for the new covenant (Colossians 2:11-13). Water baptism without repentance of heart is just as powerless to the saving of one’s soul as circumcision of the flesh is. Repentance of heart is the essence of John the Baptist’s ministry, and it is what has been discarded by church tradition. It was absent the evening I baptized the 120 prisoners, and it is absent today in many modern day churches. Lip service in a sinner’s prayer asking for forgiveness of sins, or saying one feels sorry for his sins

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without a genuine heart change, does not mean repentance of heart.

Before we explore what the Bible has to say regarding baptism, we first need to unlearn previous definitions. For most people, the definition of baptism came when you first witnessed someone getting baptized in a church. You heard the pastor give a brief explanation and watched as an individual went through the ceremony of baptism. Then, every time you read the word “baptize,” “baptism,” or “baptized” in your Bible, your mind translated that word with a memory of the baptism ceremony you first witnessed in church. The point I want to convey is your definition of “baptize” came from a church tradition.

When you were a very young child, you may have received a box of crayons and a coloring book. If you were never taught what the color yellow was, you would learn that definition from using the yellow crayon. The wrapper of the crayon would also have the word “yellow” written on it, so you would associate the color of yellow with the word “yellow.” If you saw Big Bird on Sesame Street, you would think Big Bird was yellow, and if you read the words “yellow bird” you would picture something like Big Bird.

Now, imagine if the yellow crayon mistakenly had the word “purple” on the wrapper. You would think Big Bird was a purple bird instead of a yellow bird. Without correction, you would grow up with a different definition of the color yellow than the people who grew up before you using accurately label crayons. Now, if generations of people used the same incorrectly labeled crayons, the true definition of “yellow” could be permanently changed.

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Similarly, generations of people have grown up with the wrong definition of baptism, and that is what we need to unlearn and correct.

The Greek word *baptizō* is translated by the Kings James Version into English as *baptize* and is defined as — *to immerse; to cleanse by dipping or submerging, to wash, to make clean with water.*¹ The definition “to immerse” seems to be the primary meaning as evident in the following selection taken from Strong’s lexicon:

“The clearest example that shows the meaning of baptizō is a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles and is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that in order to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be 'dipped' (baptō) into boiling water and then 'baptised' (baptizō) in the vinegar solution. Both verbs concern the immersing of vegetables in a solution.”²

The Bible uses the word “baptize” in several ways which cannot mean the traditional use of a water-based religious ceremony. The most obvious illustration occurs when the brothers of Zebedee, James and John, ask Jesus to position them on the left and right side of His kingdom throne. Jesus’ reply includes a form of the word “baptize” three times in one sentence, and none of those uses can be defined with the traditional church definition:

Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be **baptized** with the **baptism** with which I am **baptized**?" [EMPHASIS MINE]

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– Mark 10:38

Jesus uses two metaphors in the verse above to describe His upcoming suffering and crucifixion (“cup” and “baptism”). As we discussed in the previous chapter, Jesus used the word “cup” in His prayer to the Father in the garden as a figure of speech meaning his sacrificial death and affliction (Luke 22:42). In this verse, Jesus uses “baptism” synonymously with “cup” to mean that same agony and demise. If we translate the first and third use of “baptized” with “immersed,” then the verse would look like this — “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be *immersed* with the *suffering and punishment* with which I am *immersed*?” Jesus was expressing how He was going to be completely engulfed with the punishment of God for the sins of mankind.

Other uses of the word baptism take on new meaning and importance when we substitute the word “baptize” with “immerse.” “And all were *immersed* into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Corinthians 10:2). “For John *immersed* with water, but you will be *immersed* with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). “For in one Spirit we were all *immersed* into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:13).

I believe this next verse gains the most significance when we replace “baptize” and its traditional definition of a religious water ceremony with the primary definition of “immerse.” Notice how the discipleship commission given by Jesus takes on additional meaning and responsibilities:

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And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, **immersing** [WORD CHANGE AND EMPHASIS MINE] them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

– Matthew 28:18-20

With a corrected translation, we shift from a command to lower people in water during a religious ceremony in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to a command to immerse people in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Those are two separate and distinct actions. The first action is a one-time religious ceremonial event in which we are instructed to utilize the three names of the Trinity, while the second action is a command for a lifetime to lead and teach others to be completely submerged into God, His Son, and His Spirit. The first has no power in itself, whereas the latter has miraculous power to do exceedingly more than what any of us can imagine!

JOHN THE BAPTIST'S MINISTRY

Let's take a closer look in the Bible at John the Baptist with the understanding that there are, at minimum, two components to his ministry — a physical water ceremony and repentance. In addition, let's put a premium on any comments Jesus makes reflecting back on John the

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Baptist. What does Jesus tell others in regards to John's ministry? Does Jesus highlight the water element, repentance, or both?

The Book of Mark opens with the inclusion of John the Baptist being a part of "the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (Mark 1:1). The next two verses quote passages from Malachi and Isaiah and link them prophetically to the ministry of John the Baptist, which we will examine later. The fourth verse introduces us to John and describes his ministry:

John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the
baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.
[EMPHASIS MINE]

– Mark 1:4 KJV

This verse explicitly states immersion (baptism) of repentance leads to the forgiveness of sins. It's not the water washing that leads to the pardoning of sins, it is the repentant heart that does. Next, Mark tells us people from all over Judea went out to the Jordan River to get baptized by John "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). Here we see a reference both to the water element of baptism (Jordan River) and to the spiritual element of repentance (confessing their sins).

Luke's gospel contains the same direct statement about John the Baptist "proclaiming a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 3:3). Matthew's gospel introduces John the Baptist by saying he was in the wilderness preaching, "*Repent*, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2), and noted the people

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were “*confessing their sins*” (v. 6). Confessing one’s sins would be a demonstration of sincerity of a person’s repentance as most people would feel a sense of embarrassment and shame to do so in a public manner.

Towards the end of Jesus’ ministry, the chief priests and elders (religious leaders) came to Jesus while He was teaching and challenged Him regarding His authority. Jesus replied that He would answer their question about His authority if they would answer where “the baptism of John” came from (Matthew 21:25). Here we see Jesus injecting John the Baptist into the conversation with the religious leaders in which He will soon designate John’s baptism as “the way of righteousness” (Matthew 21:32).

The absence of any mention of a water ceremony in this conversation is glaring and demands contemplation. Jesus does not reference it at all. He doesn’t say you should go find a priest and let him perform a water ceremony on you. He doesn’t emphasize the cleansing one would receive by the water of John’s baptism. The only way a water ceremony gets inserted into this discourse is if the reader brings the religious traditional definition of baptism himself into the story.

Instead, Jesus told a parable of two sons who responded to their father’s instruction to go work in his vineyard. One son said he would go work but didn’t. The other son said he wouldn’t work, “but afterward he *repented*, and went” (Matthew 21:29 KJV). Jesus asked the religious leaders which of the two sons did the “will of the Father.” After the religious leaders answered correctly that the son who repented did the will of the Father, Jesus said:

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For John came unto you in the **way of righteousness**, and ye believed him not: but the publicans and the harlots believed him: and ye, when ye had seen [it], **repented not** afterward, that ye might believe him. [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Matthew 21:32 (KJV)

Repentance is the way of righteousness, and Jesus linked it to the “baptism of John.” Water is not the way of righteousness, nor is a baptism ceremony in a church venue. Jesus zeroed in on the need for repentance in John’s baptism and asked why the religious leaders didn’t believe John when they saw all the sinners repenting.

In furtherance of the evidence about repenting being a condition of receiving God’s salvation from the previous chapter, let me highlight several instances where we are explicitly warned to be baptized (repent) in order to avoid God’s judgment. John asked the religious leaders who had warned them to flee the “*wrath to come*” (Matthew 3:7). John then tells them they need to repent and do works (actions) in accordance with their repentance (v. 8) so they will not be “cut down and thrown into the fire” (v. 10).

On another occasion in which Jesus reflects back to John the Baptist, Jesus tells His audience the importance of John’s ministry of repentance. Jesus connects John’s preaching of repentance to the averting of judgment and hell:

Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, **because they did not repent.**

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"Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, **they would have repented** long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the **day of judgment** for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? **You will be brought down to Hades.** For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.

But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the **day of judgment** for the land of Sodom than for you."
[ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Matthew 11:20-24

Due to man's rebellion (sin) against his Creator, man is destined to be judged with eternal damnation in hell. However, God loves His creation of mankind so much that He sent His Son, Jesus Christ, to pay for the punishment of man. God offers forgiveness of a man's sins if man will repent. If man doesn't repent, then that man will face the "day of judgment" and will be "brought down to Hades" (hell).

As mentioned earlier, repentance is more than just a feeling of being sorry. The baptism of repentance includes actions that demonstrate change in accordance with one's repentance. Paul said, "they should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds in keeping with their repentance*" (Acts 26:20). After John the Baptist tells the crowd to "bear fruits (actions/works) in keeping with repentance," the people ask John what they must do. John then gives several specific

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examples of things they should do. He tells those who have extra to give to those who are lacking (Luke 3:11). John instructs the tax collectors to charge citizens only the true amount (Luke 3:13). To the soldiers, John directs them to cease doing violence to others, to not falsely accuse, and to be content with their wages (Luke 3:14). Sincere repentance comes from the heart and produces “fruit” from obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ.

In review, we have seen the Bible irrefutably declare the core of John the Baptist’s ministry was repentance of sins. John did utilize water baptism as a symbol of the spiritual cleansing one receives when repenting of sin, but the message John preached was that people should repent. When Jesus spoke of John the Baptist, He consistently focused on the need for people to repent in order to avoid God’s judgment, while being completely silent on the water ceremony component. Finally, we deconstructed the traditional definition of the word “baptize” and replaced it with the oldest known meaning of the word — immerse.

THE GOSPEL

With all that we learned about John the Baptist and his ministry, let’s go back to Mark 1 and take a closer look at the introduction of John the Baptist. As we read and apply what we have already learned, I believe you will see the truth of repentance’s significant role in salvation jump off the page in amazing clarity.

The chapter starts by quoting two Old Testament prophets and asserting that these passages were

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prophetically speaking about John the Baptist. The first prophetic verse is:

"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

– Malachi 3:1

John the Baptist is the “messenger” who will “prepare the way” for Jesus. How does John prepare the way for Jesus? John’s message was for all people to repent of their sins to avert the forthcoming judgment of God. When a person sincerely repents of his sins against God, that person has prepared the way for Jesus to come into his life.

The second prophetic verse Mark quotes is Isaiah 40:3, however, the Gospel of Luke includes verse 4 as well. They read:

A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

– Isaiah 40:3, 4

Verse 4 symbolizes the effect of how repentance prepares the way for Jesus. When an individual is separated from God by an insurmountable valley of depression,

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divorce, sickness, or some other desperate situation, repenting to God elevates a path for that person to readily come to Jesus. Repenting will tear down an immovable mountain of pride, power, or bitterness in one's life and allow that person to experience the power of Jesus. The crooked paths of deceit, adultery, stealing, and abusive behavior are transformed into a narrow straight path to Jesus when one repents to God. Finally the rough places of addiction, extreme laziness, and other rebellious behaviors become smooth highway to Jesus when one repents to God.

In summarizing Matthew chapter 11, Jesus speaks about the repentance of John's baptism and its ability to allow people to enter the kingdom of God. Next, Jesus expresses grief to various cities for not repenting after seeing His works and miracles performed in them and warns them of impending judgment of Hades (hell) from God. Jesus glorifies the Father and then offers the following invitation to all:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and
I will give you rest.

– Matthew 11:28

“Come” is the invitation for all mankind to repent and enter into the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ. The promise of rest from every struggle of life is given to those who repent and make Jesus Lord of their lives. This same invitation was given in the Old Testament (Isaiah 55:1-3), and it is the same invitation given in the last chapter of the Bible (Revelation 22:17). Come, repent of your sins against God. Make Jesus Lord over your life, and live in the power of His Holy Spirit for His will and His glory.

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John's baptism of repentance includes the promise of receiving an even greater baptism of the Holy Spirit from Jesus (Mark 1:8). The Holy Spirit is a gift from God to those who give their lives to Jesus. The Holy Spirit will radically change a person into the image of Jesus by producing the fruit of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22, 23) inside of the repentant Spirit-filled believer.

Lastly, Mark records Jesus proclaiming the "kingdom of God" is in the grasp of those who repent (Mark 1: 14, 15). The "kingdom of God" is described as "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). No longer will pride, covetousness, bitterness, unforgiveness, or any other idolatrous or selfish actions have a stronghold on a person who resides in God's kingdom. The repentant sinner, filled with the Holy Spirit, has become a servant of Jesus and will be empowered to defeat the enemy's schemes (1 John 4:4) and overcome his evil works (1 John 3:18; 1 John 5:4, 5).

A person's life will drastically change when he or she is living in the kingdom of God with Jesus as Lord. Forgiveness will heal wounds of bitterness and hurt. Peace and joy will be experienced daily where chaos and worry previously dominated. Generosity and love will flourish where selfishness and hate once inhabited. A new and abundant life will be lived by those who serve and obey King Jesus (John 10:10)! True repentance is the doorway to Jesus and His kingdom.

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APPLICATION

WARNING – Baptism is a multi-generational tradition with deep roots in Christianity. Many people will instantly close their ears and hearts to scrutiny efforts. However, the doctrine of baptism undergirding the tradition is easily refuted by examination of Scriptures.

- The main distinction to make about baptism is that it is all about repentance.
- One must be immersed (baptized) in repentance to God.
- Repentance produces actions (works) demonstrating one's repentance.
- Repentance, not a water ceremony, prepares the way for Jesus to come into a person's life.

10

Grace

Grace is a word thrown around often by church leaders and pastors. If there were a list of the least understood biblical concepts, grace would be near the top. The true grace of God is far bigger and more powerful than the grace being shared from most pulpits. The false grace being taught in many churches is antithetical to what true grace actually accomplishes and is a principal contributor to the cascading degradation of the church as a whole. Whether intentional or unintentional, a distorted form of grace exempting Christians from ungodly living is being taught to many congregations. The real grace of God, which is capable of justifying a sinner, gets completely flipped into a justification for continued sin. It is critically important and necessary for us to examine, challenge, and correct with Scripture the false doctrines and traditions of grace.

Unfortunately, the false tradition of grace has been cemented into the foundation of Christianity through centuries of negligent or false teachings. With each occasion of history's great church elders stamping their approval on the false teaching of grace either by explicit propagation or by the implicit act of not correcting it, the false tradition of grace has become more resistant to

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examination and scrutiny. Regardless if the teacher's or pastor's belief of grace is correct, the pervasive biases from tradition in the congregation at large conform any true teaching of grace into their pre-misconceptions. The only way to tear down this foundation is to jackhammer the false tradition of grace by contrasting it widely and loudly with real grace.

While there is only one true biblical stance on grace, each denomination seems to have its own take on what grace is, what it does, and what it means. Predominantly, the false tradition of grace is diminished to only mean *God's unconditional forgiveness of sins*. The false teaching of New Testament grace is often narrowly based on the following two verses:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.

— Ephesians 2:8, 9

I do not reject anything contained in these two verses, but the definition and teaching of grace based solely on the limited information expressed in those two passages are fueling the spread of deception within the institution of church. Many people use those verses in isolation, seriously distorting the understanding of grace in the following three ways:

- 1) They narrowly *define* grace as the eternal forgiveness of sins by God.

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- 2) They teach that an individual does not need to do anything to receive eternal forgiveness of sin by God (unconditional).
- 3) They oppose any effort to teach people a need to stop sinning by labeling such efforts as works. Obedience to God (His Word) gets disparaged as something prideful, religious, and offensive.

Below is an example (from Louis Berkhof) of grace being narrowly defined as forgiveness of sins:

“In the first place grace is an attribute of God, one of the divine perfections. It is God’s free, sovereign, undeserved favor or love to man, in his state of sin and guilt, which manifests itself in the forgiveness of sin and deliverance from its penalty...In the second place the term “grace” is used as a designation of the objective provision which God made in Christ for the salvation of man... In the third place the word “grace” is used to designate the favor of God as it is manifested in the application of the work of redemption by the Holy Spirit. It is applied to the pardon which we receive in justification, a pardon freely given by God, [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]”¹

Louis Berkhof’s writings were quite influential in seminaries and colleges across several countries, as well as individual Christians who read his work. In all three “place(s)” of Louis’ points regarding grace, his sole focus of defining grace was on God’s forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. It would be completely reasonable for a casual church goer who heard or read that explanation to walk away believing the definition of grace is limited to salvation.

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Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as payment for our sins is a significant example of grace, however, an example of something doesn't make it the definition of something. A steak is an example of a cow, but it is not the definition of a cow. As great as the example of grace of Jesus paying for the sins of mankind is, it is not the definition of grace. There is so much more to grace which every Christian needs to hear about. This will be further discussed later in this chapter.

The second way people distort the understanding of grace is by teaching that a person has unconditionally received eternal forgiveness of all sin, including whatever sins he may commit afterwards. This unconditional forgiveness of sin (grace) is given to a person solely based on the love of Jesus and is absolutely divorced from conditions or actions by the individual.

The following selection from an article about unconditional grace is emblematic of the reasoning and teaching deriving from the false tradition of grace:

"A daunting realization when considering forgiveness is that no one is perfect. No one is without sin. No one can possibly obey all of God's commandments (or any set of rules for that matter) perfectly, not even devout Christians. So, if it [sic] impossible to be perfect, how does anyone get forgiven by God? Consider Ephesians 2:8, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God". Rather than daunted, we should feel relieved that we do not need to be perfect because our forgiveness is not dependent on our deeds. God does set out moral

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boundaries for us, so we cannot simply live in our sin without ever thinking twice. But inevitably we will sin, and as long as we have faith in Him and we ask for forgiveness, honestly repenting, *we will be forgiven unconditionally.* [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]"²

If that message was presented in a church sermon, it would be warmly received in most congregations, evoking many head nods in agreement. All the while the self-contradictory statements in the author's last sentence would go unnoticed behind the veil of the false tradition of unconditional forgiveness. Ironically, the author stated people will be forgiven of sins "unconditionally" immediately after listing three conditions which must be present:

- 1) "as long as we have faith in Him"
- 2) "we ask for forgiveness"
- 3) "honestly repenting"

The false doctrine of grace stands upon a pillar of the false tradition of unconditional forgiveness of sin and is wholly dependent upon a person believing his forgiveness of sin by God came unconditionally. Once the necessity of sincere repentance (condition) is removed from those who are coming to God, along with any other condition, then a false doctrine of grace is easily received. Conversely, once you reveal the inaccuracy of the teaching of unconditional forgiveness of sin, then the support for the false doctrine and tradition of grace collapses.

My third objection to the way people use Ephesians 2:8, 9 in isolation to seriously distort the understanding of grace is that it fosters a false ideology that one should not

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do anything. Since there are, supposedly, no conditions or requirements for the individual to obtain God's forgiveness of sin, there is no incentive and consequence for the person to seek and obey God's instructions. A chronic implication from this doctrine is that it deceptively suggests a saved person is no longer held responsible by God to uphold any of His commandments.

Two more false doctrines (doctrine of no works and doctrine of no law) have been created to support this false doctrine of grace. Each of these two false doctrines' main purpose is to cancel out numerous passages containing instructions and commandments from God. The false doctrine of no works teaches any conviction of needing to do something in response to God is wrong — and the false doctrine of no law teaches you are not accountable to any laws of God. Moreover, the volume of verses in the Bible contradicting this false doctrine of grace are swiftly dismissed by the supposed elimination of the commandments (law) of God.

False doctrines of *grace*, *no works*, and *no law* act as circular reasoning that reinforce each other's narrative. All three of these false doctrines are designed to alleviate from a person any responsibility to change his sinful actions (works) by eliminating the eternal consequence of God's judgment on sin.

Verses about the inability of a person to live righteously are exploited to rationalize grace as God's unconditional cover of protection for sinful living. This false teaching inadvertently produces a numbing effect to conviction from the Holy Spirit for a person living in self-will

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or a sinful lifestyle. Many people are using this grace to excuse their own lack of living biblically and, therefore, neglect to repent and make corrective behavioral changes. An expression from a person embodying these false doctrines would be, "I know I'm not living how I'm supposed to, but thank God for His grace."

Another adverse effect from the false doctrine of grace is that it insulates people from any discipleship efforts by seemingly making the discipleship teaching obsolete and unnecessarily burdensome. A person attempting to teach believers to diligently make biblical changes in their lives is vilified as legalistic. The negative connotation of "works" is used simultaneously to repudiate the person doing the discipleship and to exonerate the sinful actions of the person subjected to the discipleship teaching.

In ministering to people during difficult moments, I often start by asking, "How is your faith?" A typical response I receive begins with, "Well, I'm not perfect..." This response is loaded with the false doctrine of grace. This answer begins by nonchalantly imposing upon the questioner a supposed agreement that one is not obligated to pursue perfection (holiness) because no one is able to be righteous. The misconception continues that since nobody is righteous, and grace being falsely defined as the unconditional and eternal forgiveness of sin, there is no reason to look at his or her actions. The implication being, "Well, I'm not perfect, and I don't need to be because of God's grace, so don't examine how I'm living. I acknowledge that I'm not perfect, but that is not relevant to my situation."

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False doctrines and false traditions of grace being taught in many churches have become a major off-ramp from the *Narrow Path* for so many church goers detouring them to the *Wide and Easy Way*. This form of popular false grace is the enticing teaching that is fueling the growth of many churches. Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarked about the motivation behind this form of grace saying, “...*the vigilant religious instinct of man for the place where grace is to be obtained at the cheapest price.*”³ Contained within this mindset is the appropriation of heaven’s eternal life at the minimal inconvenience to one’s current way of living. This heart and sentiment are behind the wide gate and easy way of religion leading to one’s destruction spoken of in Matthew 7.

Jesus’ brother wrote about the reality of men corrupting the doctrine of grace within the church:

For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, **who turn the grace of our God into lewdness** [EMPHASIS MINE] and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ.

– Jude 1:4 (NKJV)

Jude made the conclusive statement that people perverting grace into lasciviousness “deny” Jesus. This is an important delineation because Jesus had previously taught His disciples saying, “Whoever denies Me before men, I also will deny before my Father” (Matthew 10:33). We can surmise that if a person *denies* Jesus by living a life of open sin, then Jesus will *deny* that person to God. This point is either not known to those who hold onto the false doctrine

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of grace, or it gets dismissed outright on the basis of the false definition of grace.

The saddest part about false grace is that it prevents people who are desperate to experience the power of God from pursuing His true grace. This is why so many people cycle through religious programs without ever achieving victory over addiction, bitterness, or loss. They attempt to battle “spiritual forces of evil” (Ephesians 6:12) with a corrupt form of God and a distorted form of His grace.

TRUE GRACE

What does grace mean? The root meaning of both the Hebrew and Greek words translated as “grace” is *favor*. The Hebrew word *ḥēn* is defined in Strong’s Lexicon as — *favor, grace, elegance, or acceptance*.⁴ Strong’s defines the Greek word *charis* as — *grace, good will, loving-kindness, or favor*.⁵ As it pertains to God, grace is simply God’s *unmerited favor* expressed to an individual, group, people, or nation.

Because God is all knowing, is ever present, and has unlimited power, He is able to dispense His *favor* in an infinite number of ways, methods, and occasions. Imputing (crediting or accounting) His righteousness (salvation) upon a repentant sinner is one amazing example of God’s *favor*, but it is not the definition of grace. The Bible explicitly describes God’s grace in ways other than salvation. Some examples include:

Mary will (miraculously) conceive the Son of God – Luke 1:29-32

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David's hope that God would allow his child to live – 2 Samuel 12:22

Spiritual gifts (prophecy, ministering, teaching, etc.) – Romans 12:6

Physical gifts of the world (finances, animals, food, clothing, etc.) – 1 Peter 4:10

Transformation from a persecutor of the church into an Apostle – 1 Corinthians 15:9, 10

Favor of God was upon Jesus – Luke 2:40

Broad material and spiritual favor upon the early church – Acts 4:33, 34

Financial gift for needy – 2 Corinthians 8:4, 6, 7

Sufficiency (contentment) in all things at all times (This is a big one!) – 2 Corinthians 9:8

Joseph being elevated to a position of prominence and privilege in the prison – Gen.39:21

In addition, below are implicit examples demonstrating the enormous magnitude of God's favor (grace) poured out on behalf of His chosen people:

God caused the Egyptians to readily give wealth and provision to Israel – Exodus 3:21; 11:3; 12:36

Large hailstones killed the Ammonites – Joshua 10:11

One's enemies will be at peace to a man who pleases Yahweh – Proverbs 16:7

The Red Sea parted, dry passage, enemies drowned – Exodus 14

God caused Israel's enemies to flee from sounds of armies, horses, and chariots – 2 Kings 7:6

The sun stood still for a whole day – Joshua 10:13

God orchestrates events for a desired outcome – 1 Kings 12:15

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As you get a small taste of the sheer scope and impact of God's true grace available to each one of us, the negative ramifications of offering people a false doctrine of grace becomes clear. Presenting people false grace instead of true grace is like taking the label off a package containing miracle medicine for cancer, wrapping it around a pack of cigarettes, and then giving it to a lung cancer patient with promises of healing power for smoking. Instead of offering people God's immense and powerful favor (grace) to deliver them out of sin's stronghold, the false doctrine of grace wraps God's costly salvation around unrepentant people who continue to walk in their sin.

It is objectionable to deprive a person of the amazing hope and promise of God's infinite power and wisdom directed to any situation in a follower's life by not teaching accurately what the Bible says about grace. Grace is God involving Himself, with all His attributes (all-knowing, all-powerful, all-seeing), to the benefit of the individual or group. Grace is the power of God working in the lives of His disciples.

Paul recounts a response God gave him after requesting healing on three separate occasions:

But he said to me, "**My grace** is sufficient for you, for **my power** is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the **power of Christ** [ALL EMPHASIS MINE] may rest upon me.

– 2 Corinthians 12:9

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God used the word “grace” synonymously with His power. Paul was clearly making an equivalency of God’s power and Christ’s power with grace. What stronghold of sin can resist God’s Power? What offense or bitterness can defy God’s power to forgive? What circumstance is able to thwart God’s power to establish? To parrot Paul, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31).

God’s grace is absolutely available for all areas of our lives. There is no circumstance or situation in one’s life exempt from the influence of the grace of God to bless, protect, enable, advance, encourage, or equip. Primarily, the purpose of God’s grace is to empower a repentant person to break the strongholds of sin and to live a holy life.

Peter’s first epistle speaks extensively about the topic of grace in this context and exhorts readers to know about all its manifestations. He writes, “As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the *manifold grace* of God” (1 Peter 4:10 NKJV). The word “manifold” means — *of many kinds, numerous, and varied*. There are numerous variations of God’s grace available to and being distributed among mankind. Peter is specifically encouraging readers to utilize the various gifts (God’s favor or grace) individually received to the benefit of the group (church) as a whole. One individual given one kind of gift from God should use that gift to help a person who is lacking, and the person lacking receives a different gift from God with which he is to help the other person who lacks his gift.

Later in the same epistle, Peter writes:

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Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour.

Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world.

But may **the God of all grace**, [EMPHASIS MINE] who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle [you].

– 1 Peter 5:8-10 NKJV

Peter is describing a grace of God the church today is in dire need of but has been obscured by the tradition of false grace. The selected passages above start with a warning to the church about the devil stalking the body of believers (“brotherhood”). Just because a person turns to God does not mean that he will not have to battle Satan. Just the opposite is true. When a person starts to pursue God, Satan, like a lion, will pounce while that person is weak or wounded. Peter, however, is encouraging the church with the news that they do not have to fight the devil alone. He tells the church they will have “the God of **ALL** grace” on their side if they resist Satan and be resolute in their faith in God.

Notice the difference in the grace Peter talks about compared to the grace so often heard about in churches today. Peter didn’t absolve the church with some statement on how we all succumb to the temptations from the devil and offer a grace to cover failure. No, Peter imperatively

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tells us to resist Satan and offers a multi-faceted empowering grace — an amazing grace!

The purpose of God's grace in the passages above is divided into four parts. The first purpose is significantly important for every believer to have forefront in his or her mind. God's grace will "perfect" or complete you, meaning God will use all His wisdom and power (grace) to change you from a slave of sin to a conquering king and priest of the Living God. The writer of Hebrews echoes this truth writing that God will "make you complete in every good work to do His will" (Hebrews 13:21 NKJV). A man or woman of faith will be radically changed by the grace of God to not sin and to fulfill God's will in all things.

The second purpose of God's grace is to make whatever positive change in a person constant, firm, and stable. This concept aligns with many other passages in the Bible and can be summed up with what Paul wrote to the Philippian church — "He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). The progress of the person's positive change will not regress or flee away because grace will sustain what has already been accomplished. The grace of God produces endurance in the lives of those who receive His favor.

The third purpose of God's grace is to strengthen a person in a situation or time of need. I cannot begin to count how many times I have experienced God strengthening me so I could face a difficult or challenging situation in life. God gave me grace to handle the death of my father, to withstand the rejection from my oldest daughter, to weather the betrayal of a close friend, to

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endure a season of constant debilitating pain, and to stand alone against a unified religious multitude spurning the advocating of biblical truths. There are so many circumstances each one of us face in life in which we desperately need God's grace to give us the strength needed to stand victorious. Thank God for His grace!

The fourth purpose of God's grace is to lay the foundation for building upon. I can look back and see moments in my life when outsiders may have interpreted traits of courage, acumen, or fortitude from my actions during difficult or trying seasons of tribulation, when in reality, I was firmly rooted in the foundation of God's grace. While others have to clean and rebuild from the damage caused by the storms of life, God's grace gives His followers an unshakeable wisdom and faith.

Peter concludes his epistle with the following statement summarizing his entire letter:

By Silvanus, a faithful brother as I regard him, I have written briefly to you, exhorting and declaring that **this is the true grace of God**. [EMPHASIS MINE]
Stand firm in it.

– 1 Peter 5:12

The phrase “true grace of God” signifies there is a false grace of God, otherwise the distinction is irrelevant. The true grace of God is His divine involvement available in every aspect of one's life, including imputing His righteousness to a repentant sinner. Peter continues this idea of the all-encompassing nature of grace in his second epistle saying God's “divine power (grace) has granted to us

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all things that pertain to life and godliness" (2 Peter 1:3). Grace can help a person overcome any stronghold, equip a person to conquer any situation of life, and thoroughly transform a person into the image of Jesus.

HOW TO GET GRACE

So the obvious question that needs to be asked is how does someone obtain God's grace? Let me begin by giving you answers that are not in the Bible. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that you get grace from God by going to church on Sundays. You don't get God's grace by having an emotional reaction to a sermon, song, or religious event. You do not receive grace by participating in a religious ceremony. And finally, as we read in Ephesians 2:8, 9 at the beginning of this chapter, you cannot do anything to earn or demand God's grace.

There is no entitlement to God's grace for any person. No one can accomplish for himself a standing of righteousness with God or demand His grace for actions taken on his own. God's grace is a gift.

So who does God give grace to? This is the important question which needs to be answered truthfully and clearly. The answer? God gives grace *to the humble*.

But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

— James 4:6

THE NARROW GATE

Both James in the verse above, and Peter in the verse below, quote Proverbs 3:34 to declare that God gives grace to the humble. They both highlight the point that not only does God give grace to a humble person but He also “opposes” the proud person. Think about that for a moment. If a person fails to humble himself before God and arrogantly yields to his pride inside, not only will he not receive any grace from God, but now God is actively contending with him.

Pride is the antonym for humility. A humble person empties himself of pride and self-promotion. A person of humility acknowledges his own limitations in the presence of another who is superior and submits with the appropriate respect and submission due. Peter reiterates the same truths and earnestly pleads with his readers to act accordingly so as to receive God’s grace:

Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for **"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."**

Humble yourselves [EMPHASIS MINE], therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,

casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

— 1 Peter 5:5-7

The humble person is incapable of boasting by the very nature of being humble. If you acknowledge Yahweh is God and you are not — He is the Creator, and you are

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created by Him — He is holy, and you are sinful — and He can save you and you cannot, how is it possible for you to boast that you saved yourself? Sincere humbling of self makes it impossible to pridefully boast in one's own capabilities or actions. If the pride is present, then the sincere humbling is not. Those states cannot exist together.

I recall a day when God convicted me of hidden pride in my life. This was not the normal pride most people have before they come to God, which I previously possessed in very great measure, rather this was a pride I was not aware of. I remember feeling very close to God that day. I was finishing up on a new Bible study for prison, and I was cognizant of the presence of the Holy Spirit leading me in the outline of the study and bringing certain passages to my mind, steering me to the next point or application. I had such excitement from the intimacy I was experiencing with God and from the revelations He was showing me. I put the metaphorical period on the study and immediately departed for a city-wide prayer event at a local church.

While basking in the affection and nearness I was experiencing with God on the drive to the church, I heard God say in my spirit, "Rob, you are prideful about not being prideful." I reacted with an exclamation, "WHAT?!!" It did not make sense to me in the moment, so I asked, "How can I be prideful about not being prideful?" As soon as I asked Him, God revealed to me how I frequently felt inside myself when I saw people exhibiting worldly and selfish pride. He showed me my thoughts like, "I'm glad I'm not prideful anymore like (so and so) is demonstrating right now."

THE NARROW GATE

In full candidness, I instantly experienced a conflict of emotions, each of them battling to evoke opposing reactions. On one hand, I felt offended and wanted to defend myself with God. On the other hand, I felt a solemn heaviness from God as He was quietly waiting for me to repent to Him for what He had just unveiled to me. Although I felt each of these sensations, I immediately repented to God with all my heart. I humbled myself before God.

As soon as I repented, God showed me several corrections He wanted me to make both in the ministry and in my personal life. Furthermore, God gave me favor (grace) to see subtle ways pride tries to enter my heart. He gave me a defensive awareness for the slightest indication of pride's arrival so I can guard my heart from its attempts to gain entry. Over time, I noticed an intolerance and disgust for even the slightest prideful thought within me and a quick reflex to cast such thoughts down. I came to realize this was the purifying power of God's grace in one area of my life.

Notice how harmonious all the Scriptures become when you remove the chaff of the false doctrine and are left with the wheat of the truth. Humbleness of heart is the quality God searches for in a man or woman to pour out His grace. This was true in the Old Testament as well as it is in the New.

The Old Testament contrasts pride with humility declaring pride brings shame while the humble get wisdom (Proverbs 11:2 NKJV). Wisdom would be a manifestation of the grace of God and matches the criteria of how all other

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forms of grace are distributed — God gives wisdom to the humble. In addition, the Old Testament reveals on several occasions that “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10; Psalm 111:10; Job 28:28; Proverbs 1:7). If a person fears Yahweh, that person has humbled himself to God and has begun to gain wisdom from Him.

Solomon wrote instructing his son to get wisdom saying it will be “grace to your neck” (Proverbs 3:22 NKJV) and “an ornament of grace” on your head (Proverbs 4:9). Wisdom is another manifestation of God’s favor (grace) to help a person in wide range of circumstances in life. Wisdom, given to the humble by God, surrounds the individual with God’s favor like a chain locket surrounds the neck of a person. God’s gift of wisdom (grace) stays with the individual and produces additional forms of God’s favor (grace) for the individual using it.

SAVING GRACE

Let’s take a closer look at what we just learned about God giving grace to the humble. Let’s see if humbleness is a required condition for a person to receive the grace of forgiveness of sins (salvation). As repeatedly addressed throughout this book, sincere repentance from the heart is the standard upon which God determines whether He will impute His righteousness to a person. Humbleness is a foundational component of repentance, without which, the expression of repentance becomes a hollow insincere effort of manipulation. Repentant sinners are the humble.

THE NARROW GATE

We read at the beginning of this chapter where Paul wrote to the Ephesians how grace is a gift and not obtainable by works. False traditions of grace deeply embedded in much of the institution of church allow many people to reflexively dismiss any notion of grace being conditional. The fallacy of their reasoning is that any condition being met by the person to obtain salvation makes that condition works by the recipient. A condition to receiving a gift does not make the gift something earned.

For example, the national restaurant chain Chipotle ran a promotion during the NBA finals in which they gave away burritos every time a player made a three-pointer. Whenever a player made a three-point shot, Chipotle would tweet out a code. The first 300 people to text that specific code to a certain number would receive the gift of free food. The food was “given” away by Chipotle, but there were several conditions that needed to be met before an individual received the gift. A condition for a gift is not works.

Furthermore, Paul wrote about the saving grace of God in his Epistle to the Romans describing “a remnant according to the *election of grace*” (Romans 11:5 KJV). To understand what *election of grace* means, we first need to highlight what people do during an election — they *choose* someone or something. Just like Chipotle *chose* how they would give away their food to their customers, God *chooses* whom He will save.

Matthew records Jesus saying “for many are called, but few are *chosen*” (Matthew 20:16; 22:14 NKJV). God’s desire is for everyone to be saved and calls all mankind (“the

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many”) to submit to His Son Jesus, but only the truly repentant (“the few”) are *chosen*. The true church of repentant believers is frequently referred to as the *chosen*. Paul calls the people in the church of Colossae “God’s *chosen* ones” (Colossians 3:12), and he says to the Thessalonians, “God...has *chosen* you” (1 Thessalonians 1:4).

God chooses to save certain people and chooses not to save certain people. God is not indiscriminate in how He chooses. He has revealed through His prophets the conditions on which He chooses to save people. The grace of God which saves a person is given to people with the same standard as all other manifestations of His grace. God saves the humble:

For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name [is] Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy [place], **With him [who] has a contrite and humble spirit** [EMPHASIS MINE], To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones.

– Isaiah 57:15 (NKJV)

All these things my hand has made, and so all these things came to be, declares the LORD. **But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word** [EMPHASIS MINE].

– Isaiah 66:2

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If you skimmed over reading the two verses above, stop, go back, and read them again. Isaiah is quoting God's standard for a person to be chosen to dwell with Him and receive His grace. What is another word describing the heart of a person who is humble, contrite, and trembles at the word of God (fear of the LORD)? Repentant. God chooses to save the repentant person.

The Holy Spirit spoke through David in the following Psalms:

The LORD [is] near to those who have a broken heart, **And saves such as have a contrite spirit.**
[EMPHASIS MINE]

– Psalm 34:18 (NKJV)

The sacrifices God desires are a humble spirit - O God, **a humble and repentant heart you will not reject.** [EMPHASIS MINE]

– Psalm 51:17 (NET)

God will accept all who come to Him with a sincere and humble heart. Everyone! No exceptions! Is there anything God cannot do? Yes. God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18; Numbers 23:19; Titus 1:2). That means no matter how awful your past may have been, there is hope. If your past was unequalled in sin and wickedness, God will forgive and save you if you sincerely repent. He has given His Word on this, and God is faithful to fulfill all that He says (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

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Manasseh was a wicked king of Judah. The Bible describes him as a cruel tyrant who shed innocent blood (2 Kings 21:16), practiced witchcraft, and sacrificed his sons to a pagan god (2 Chronicles 33:6). God commented about King Manasseh through His prophet characterizing him as more evil than all the pagan Amorites who were in the land before Israel (2 Kings 21:11). He was the worst of the worst kings.

Because King Manasseh was so evil and led God's people astray, God brought the Assyrian army to capture and oppress Manasseh. In his persecution and captivity, King Manasseh came to realize his limitations, feebleness, and desperation. After 55 years of being a wicked king, doing horrible things, and deliberately rebelling against God, Manasseh repented:

And when he was in distress, he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and **humbled himself greatly** [EMPHASIS MINE] before the God of his fathers.

He prayed to him, and God was moved by his entreaty and heard his plea and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

– 2 Chronicles 33:12, 13

God is faithful in all that He says. God saved Manasseh, the most-wicked king Israel ever had, after he repented. God will not reject any person who is contrite and humble. No matter how many times you may have failed in the past, God will give His forgiveness and saving grace to you if you sincerely repent.

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I would like to close this chapter by sharing two of my favorite Bible verses about grace. The first verse is descriptive about God's passionate desire to intercede on the behalf of any person whose heart belongs to Him (think humble):

"For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of [those] whose heart [is] loyal to Him...

– 2 Chronicles 16:9a (NKJV)

When I read that verse I picture God anxiously wanting to make a miracle happen for anyone who will turn his or her heart to God. He is looking diligently amongst the billions of people on earth just waiting for someone to humble himself so He can pour out “strong support” (grace). What is the condition He is looking for? A sincere heart.

The second verse is an extension of the previous verse in that it is an invitation for all humble and repentant people to come to God and ask Him for grace and mercy. This invitation was engraved with the blood of Jesus Christ and allows the holder to enter the throne room of God almighty:

Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

– Hebrews 4:16 (NKJV)

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APPLICATION

- Have you previously been misled to believe grace was simply God's salvation for sinners?
- Do you hear people use the word "grace" to mean unconditional forgiveness of sins for all time?
- Can you see how this doctrine lulls people into a false sense of security (The Wide Gate)?
- It is important to remember that the false doctrine of grace is founded on UNCONDITIONAL forgiveness of sins.
- The condition of sincere repentance is easily supported with Scripture, and its teaching will expose the error of unconditional salvation.
- Make known that God gives grace (blessings, favor, gifts, salvation, etc.) to the humble (repentant).

11

Believe

Let me begin this chapter by sharing a true story about a man in our Saturday morning men's group. This group is demographically diverse in that it has included retirees, young men, pastors, parolees, business owners, and blue collar workers. This group is also denominationally diverse as the men attend a wide variety of churches. The group meets weekly with the sole purpose of encouraging each other to live free in Jesus.

At this particular meeting, a rather new face in the group was giving testimony of how God had recently radically changed him from someone you wouldn't want to meet on the streets at night to a hard working new husband and seeker of God. He was glorifying God for all the favor he was being shown and for the peace and love he was experiencing. Then he said something to the effect of, "I feel like I need to be doing something for God's kingdom."

Immediately one of the older men in the group stood up, pointed at him, and said, "Works! Works! Works!"

This brief outburst is a perfect illustration of a serious repercussion originating from false doctrines in the

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church. In this particular instance, a new and sincere follower of Jesus was rebuked by an established believer for wanting to respond to God's mercies and grace by sharing His faith with others. Although I concede the story I just shared is anecdotal, I am convinced the logic and reasoning behind the rebuke is, unfortunately, representative of a large segment of those who profess Christianity. There are many in the church who regard *works* in a disparaging manner.

This false doctrine has made *works* a pejorative within a large segment of the church. There are several reasons behind why false teaching about works is propagated, but the primary purpose is to support the false doctrine of *unconditional* salvation from sin, which is commonly misnomered as grace. Verses similar to "not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:9 NKJV) are overly accentuated so as to malign any connection between faith and works. By eliminating all conditions or actions necessary to receive God's salvation, the lie of false grace becomes believable and alluring to congregations. The key function of the false teaching of works is to greatly reinforce the dogma of *unconditional* grace.

I have a pastor friend who was in attendance that day in the Saturday men's group who joined the effort to make sure the new follower of Jesus was relieved of any conviction to do works. Many months later, as I was preparing to write this chapter, I recounted the story with my pastor friend and asked him if remembered it. Not only did he remember the incident, he doubled-down on his perspective that the correction was needed so the young

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man wouldn't feel obligated to do works. My friend loves the Lord with all his heart, but unfortunately, he grew up learning about God and the Bible through the generational lens of church traditions.

Let me be crystal clear in saying biblical works are a very good thing. The Bible emphatically declares we were created to do good works (Ephesians 2:10), to provoke each other to do good works (Hebrews 10:24), to be ready for "every good work" (Titus 3:1), to be zealous in good works (Titus 2:14), and to be devoted to good works (Titus 3:14). In fact, Jesus instructs His follows to "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16).

An important piece of information you must know before going further is that the word *works* means actions or deeds (something you do), in addition to the effort of a business, employment, or enterprise. Simply doing what God instructs you to do instead of doing what feels good or seems best to you is doing good works. Telling the truth to your own detriment, forgiving someone who really hurt you, being honest on your tax return, caring for your neighbor, and loving your wife like Christ loved the church are all works which others will see and thereby glorify God. These examples of works, and so many more, are why you were created.

Paul and Timothy prayed for the Spirit to fill the church in Colossae — petitioning for them to know all of God's will. Why? So they would *please God* by doing His will (works):

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that you may walk worthy of the Lord, **fully pleasing [Him], being fruitful in every good work** [EMPHASIS MINE] and increasing in the knowledge of God;

– Colossians 1:10 NKJV

Walking in God's will and being abundant in all good work pleases God in the same context as sin displeases Him. The Spirit commented on God's feeling of displeasure when David sinned against Uriah, the husband of Bathsheba, saying "the thing that David had done displeased the LORD" (2 Samuel 11:27). Meanwhile, Jesus said of Himself "I always do the things (works) that are pleasing to Him" (John 8:29). David did a work of the flesh, which displeased God, while the "things" Jesus did were works of obedience (Philippians 2:8) to the Father, which pleased Him. Works of obedience are not only NOT a bad thing, they are what God wants and expects from us.

There are more occasions in the New Testament of works being portrayed in a positive light rather than a negative light. Whenever the New Testament does speak critically of works, it is overwhelmingly limited in the context of stating that works cannot earn a person the righteousness necessary to save himself. One cannot obtain justification in the eyes of God separate from the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Because God is just, He cannot forgive a person of sin without payment, and no amount of good works or religious acts can satisfy the payment of sin. Jesus' death is the payment God accepts for all sin for all mankind and is the sole reason God can be "just to forgive" a person (1 John 1:9).

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Former New York City mayor and international businessman Michael Bloomberg marshalled his extensive resources and political connections to anti-smoking, healthy eating, and gun control causes with remarkable effect. In light of the achievements to those causes, Michael was interviewed by the New York Times when he arrogantly said, “I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.”¹

Michael Bloomberg’s belief that his good deeds will earn himself entry into heaven is a precise illustration of the nature of works in which the Bible speaks with a negative connotation. When Paul wrote “not of works, lest anyone should boast,” he was referring to anyone who thought it within one’s own capability to earn God’s favor similar to that of the former New York City mayor.

In similar fashion, one cannot do enough religious functions, be generous enough, minister to others enough, refrain from sinful actions enough, or be good enough to earn his way into heaven. Since Jesus is the only acceptable sacrifice for sins, then no one is able to rightly stand in God’s presence on his or her own accord. One must be *given* righteousness from the pure and holy blood of Jesus in order to stand justified in the presence of God.

FAITH ONLY?

In church circles there is an ongoing debate regarding salvation in which two lines of division oppose each other — *faith only* and *faith plus works*. Due to the

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seriousness of the subject at hand, I believe the question of which camp accurately portrays the teaching of the Bible needs our full attention and effort to answer. The faith only camp, holding to the modern tradition of grace, believes that salvation is received solely through faith and not through any action (works) by the individual. Meanwhile, the faith plus works camp believes the faith that receives salvation is distinct from an ordinary intellectual belief because of the works.

It should be noted that both camps affirm salvation is a gift from God, which can only be received by faith. Both the faith only camp and the faith plus works camp believe that no one can earn one's salvation in any way. However, generally speaking, the faith plus works camp believes that works define true faith. Faith, which simply means belief, has a wide ranging spectrum. On one side of the spectrum of faith, actions are taken in direct correlation to one's belief in God and what He teaches and commands, and on the opposite side of the spectrum of faith, is a mental exercise of a profession of belief in God without any direct action of obedience to what God teaches and commands. The works, or lack of works, simply differentiate between true faith and dead faith.

James makes the following statement regarding this very point:

What good is it, my brothers, **if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?**

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,

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and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?

So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– James 2:14-17

When James asks if that faith can save, he is referring to the side of the spectrum in which a person declares a belief in God, yet he or she does not do anything in accordance with what the God he or she professes to believe in commands. Many people believe avoiding the potato chip and cookie isles in the grocery store and frequenting a gym several times a week will lead to a longer and healthier life, yet most people do not adjust their lives on the basis of that belief. Meanwhile, on the other side of the belief spectrum, there are people who diligently pursue nutritious eating habits and never miss a scheduled workout at the local gym. Both examples share a belief regarding diet and exercise, but the one whose works follow what he believes will produce the desired results.

The Holy Spirit, through James, makes the conclusive declaration that “faith without works is dead” (James 2:26 KJV). Here lies the dividing line between the two opposing beliefs about salvation. James makes the point that a person believing there is one God without submitting to and obeying that God is no different than the demons who believe (James 2:19). The demons, who have more than an academic belief in God, shudder at the coming judgement of God. So what does a person who has faith without works have in common with demons? They

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both share a lifestyle of active rebellion against God and His will.

Martin Luther was a church giant during the reformation, and his writings and teachings are a cornerstone for protestant beliefs regarding *unconditional* grace. In his effort to defend his new doctrine of *justification by faith only*, Luther seemed to attempt to diminish the countering argument of works based faith described in the Epistle of James when he wrote:

“In a word, St. John’s Gospel and his first Epistle, St. Paul’s Epistles, especially Romans, Galatians and Ephesians, and St. Peter’s first Epistle are the books that show you Christ and teach you all that it is necessary and good for you to know, even though you were never to see or hear any other book or doctrine. *Therefore St. James’ Epistle is really and epistle of straw*, [EMPHASIS MINE] compared to them; for it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”²

James’ rhetorical back and forth regarding faith with works versus faith without works appear to be an underlying factor, if not the primary reason, why Luther treated the Epistle of James as inferior to other Scripture and worthy to be burned. Luther trumpeted the (“not of works”) aspect in Paul’s writings to base his new faith only doctrine, and James’ seemingly contradictory doctrine “a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24) would require an explanation. By relegating the entire Epistle of James as “straw” to be burned, Luther could then summarily dismiss any reference to works with faith

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without the need to answer James' doctrine directly or re-examine his own view.

Since God is the judge of whom He will save or punish, then God gets to determine whom He will impute (put to one's account) Jesus' righteousness upon. Just like God revealed to Moses His instructions (conditions) for what the people needed to do in order to have the plague of God's judgement harmlessly pass over them in Egypt during the Exodus (Exodus 12), God has revealed through the Bible the conditions of what a person must meet in order to have the blood of Jesus cover him or her from the wrath of God. The Bible says one must repent (see chapter 8) and *believe* (Mark 1:15; Mark 16:16; John 3:16; Romans 10:9, 10).

BELIEF IN GOD

Believing in God is a necessary condition one must meet in order to be saved. The writer of Hebrews declares:

But without faith [it is] impossible to please [him]:
for he that cometh to God **must believe that he is**,
[EMPHASIS MINE] and [that] he is a rewarder of
them that diligently seek him.

– Hebrews 11:6 KJV

Notice that “faith” and “believe” are used interchangeably in the verse above. Both Greek words *pistis* (faith) and *pisteuō* (believe) use each other's word to define themselves, i.e., faith means to believe, while believe means to have faith in something. The verse above states

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that in order for a person to come to God, that person “must” believe that God is God. Furthermore, that person “must” also believe that God is a rewarder to all who “diligently seek Him.” Here we see that a person’s faith or belief must be more than just a casual acknowledgement that something is true, it must be a constant pursuit of God.

There is a concept known by biblical scholars called the *Principle of First Mention* which puts an emphasis on the first occasion of a word, phrase, or doctrine in the Bible believing it to be fundamental in understanding its meaning and relevance in subsequent instances. “Believed” is first mentioned in Genesis 15:6, a passage which may give us special insight into the significance of this concept, expanding our understanding of “faith” or “belief” in God. This passage appears in a story about Abraham, who is often referred to as the father of faith.

We pick up the narrative where God tells Abraham to look up into the night sky and count all the stars. As Abraham makes the quick realization of the impossible task at hand due to the immense number of stars, God tells Abraham his descendants will be just as countless as the stars in the heaven or sand on the seashore. The next verse is pivotal to understanding belief that leads to salvation:

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

– Genesis 15:6 (NKJV)

This thing which God had told Abraham was not a simple thing for him to believe. Both he and his wife Sarah were childless and advanced in years. In that day and

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culture, having many sons was highly cherished as it was a means of producing significant prosperity and affluence. For Abraham to not have any children would be seen as a disgrace in societal circles and presumed by others as a curse upon Sarah. Abraham was 75 years old when God first told him He would make Abraham “a great nation” (Genesis 12:2, 4), and he had to wait until he was 100 years old for Sarah to give birth to Isaac (Genesis 21:5). We often get discouraged if God doesn’t answer our prayers in a day or a week, but Abraham remained faithful to God’s promise for twenty-five years.

Not only did Abraham continue to believe God day after day when all evidence seemed to suggest otherwise, but when he was ninety-nine years old, God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, which means “father of a multitude” (Genesis 17:5). That meant each time Abraham’s name was used in a greeting, or he introduced himself to somebody new, he would increasingly have felt the weight of ridicule and mockery as he proclaimed his name “father of a multitude” while everyone readily observed him to be old and childless by Sarah.

Furthermore, God put Abraham to the test to see if he would act (works/deeds) according to his belief. God reiterates His previous promise to make Abraham a “father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4 NKJV) and will exceedingly multiply his descendants (Genesis 17:2). God then makes a covenant with Abraham and instructs him to do something very unusual and painful as a token of faith for his part of the covenant. God instructs Abraham to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin and of those of every male in his house,

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both descendants and those he purchased. The Bible records Abraham did exactly what God had instructed to himself and to every male of his house “that very same day” (Genesis 17:23 NKJV).

This was no small act of obedient faith by Abraham. He caused all to obey this strange instruction from God in the face of years without God’s promise coming true. Abraham would undoubtedly have been aware he would encounter a significant amount of resistance to his intentions to circumcise the first born of his family and those who worked for him.

We are told a significant rift occurred between Moses and his wife when they implemented the circumcision of their son in obedience to God’s instruction to Moses. Zipporah, Moses’ wife, “took a sharp stone and cut off the foreskin of her son and cast [it] at [Moses]’ feet, and said, ‘Surely you [are] a husband of blood to me!’” (Exodus 4:25 NKJV). Moses’ wife did not have the conviction of faith that Moses had and could not make sense of the supposedly barbaric act on her child. It is reasonable to assume many in Abraham’s group had similar feelings and reactions to the efforts to circumcise as Moses’ wife did, but Abraham immediately performed all that God had instructed, demonstrating his belief in the promise God had made to him.

The Principle of First Mention is extremely fruitful in the case of *belief* as the New Testament refers back to Genesis 15:6 on five separate occasions to link righteousness with Abraham’s faith (Romans 4:3, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). Romans 4:3, Romans 4:9, and

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Galatians 3:6 are used to emphasize that Abraham received God's righteousness because of his faith and not from works of the law. The other two references (Romans 4:22 and James 2:23) make great effort to distinguish that the faith Abraham exhibited was on the spectrum of belief which produced action (works/deeds).

Let's look at the one in Romans first:

Therefore [it is] of faith that [it might be] according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all

(as it is written, "I have made you a father of many nations") in the presence of Him whom he believed-God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did;

who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be."

And not being weak in faith, [EMPHASIS MINE] he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb.

– Romans 4:16-19 (NKJV)

We see Paul recounting the conflict that existed between the promise of God to Abraham and the reality of his age and Sarah's barrenness. Paul remarks how Abraham maintained hope even though all the evidence was contrary to his own hope. Then, he comments about the spectrum

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of belief in Abraham saying, “And not being weak in faith.” This observation on Abraham’s faith will be further developed in the following passages.

He did not waver at the promise of God **through unbelief**, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God,

and **being fully convinced** [ALL EMPHASIS MINE] that what He had promised He was also able to perform.

And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness."

— Romans 4:20-22 (NKJV)

Abraham’s faith was an enduring faith. He “did not waver” at what God promised or oscillate between belief and unbelief. He remained steady and firm in trusting God. Abraham’s faith was also not a casual faith. Paul notes that Abraham was “fully convinced” that God was capable of doing what He said He would do. These descriptions fit tightly into what we explored earlier in Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV) — “But without faith [it is] impossible to please [Him], for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and [that] He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” We, like Abraham, must be fully convinced that God will do all that He promises to do in the Bible.

This next point is critical to understanding New Testament faith. The Bible states Abraham’s unwavering, enduring, and fixed belief was the *condition* for which God chose to give him His righteousness. It wasn’t the

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circumcision that moved God to impute Abraham with righteousness, it was Abraham's deep-hearted faith in God. Why is this important to understanding New Testament faith? Paul continues with the answer:

Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him,

but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him [EMPHASIS MINE] who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead,

– Romans 4:23, 24 (NKJV)

Just like Abraham was given righteousness from God because of his faith, New Testament believers will also be given righteousness from God based upon their faith in God. God chooses to impute the righteousness of Jesus on men and women who believe Him. The standard of believing is one where people do what God instructs them to do.

Later in this same epistle, Paul tells us plainly that one must confess Jesus is Lord and believe in his heart that God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9). To make Jesus Lord means to give Him absolute authority of decision making in all areas of your life. The many and enduring actions in following Jesus as Lord would entail a belief on the spectrum that would be filled with works just like Abraham. The belief that God raised Jesus from the dead would also include a belief that God will raise you from the dead as well. These two characteristics are describing the type of belief or faith one

The heart reflects the sincerity of man through his works, whether good or evil.

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must exhibit in order for God to impute His grace of salvation.

Paul restates what he wrote in verse 9 with, "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Romans 10:10 NKJV). Notice that the heart is where God looks to examine the belief of man, and not from the head or mouth. The heart reflects the sincerity of man through his works, whether good or evil. The confession from the mouth proclaiming Jesus as Lord represents both repentance and submission. Inherent in confessing Jesus as Lord is admission that one was previously rebelliously acting in God's place as lord over one's own life.

Obedience to Jesus as Lord will demonstrate the belief one has in the heart. James makes this point with the fifth reference in the New Testament back to Genesis 15:6:

Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that **faith apart from works is useless?**

Was not Abraham our father **justified by works** when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar?

You see that faith was active along with his works, and **faith was completed by his works;**

and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"--and he was called a friend of God.

You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.

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And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute **justified by works** when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?

For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, **so also faith apart from works is dead**. [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

— James 2:20-26

In the selected passages above, James makes six references in seven verses of works being a necessary part of one's belief. James mentions Abraham's obedience to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice and Rahab's treasonous action to receive and protect the spies for Israel as demonstrations of works with faith. The two examples of action from Abraham and Rahab exemplify a total commitment of belief in God. Abraham was about to kill his beloved miracle son believing that God would raise him up again (Hebrews 11:19), and Rahab was making a life and death decision for herself and her family based on her belief in God (Joshua 2:11, 12).

Both Paul in Romans 4 and James in chapter 2 make a connection between a person's belief and his works. Jesus highlights the same connection of works with faith in the story of a paralyzed man and his friends. These men were seeking an opportunity to bring their paralyzed friend to Jesus after a hearing a report about His teaching and miracles of healing, but they were obstructed by the large crowds that had gathered around Him. The paralytic man's friends, being resolute and persistent in their belief that

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Jesus could heal him, went up to the rooftop and lowered the paralyzed man in his bed down to Jesus.

Matthew chronicles this event:

And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And **when Jesus saw their faith**, [EMPHASIS MINE] he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

– Matthew 9:2

Notice that Jesus "saw" the faith of the men. How could Jesus see their belief? He saw their actions (works). These men didn't have a casual or apathetic belief that Jesus could heal their sick friend. No, these men were diligent in seeking Jesus. When their efforts were impeded by the size of the crowd, they did not quit or give up. They resorted to a different tactic. These men carried their friend up to a rooftop, removed the tiles, and interrupted the popular event by lowering the sick man down. Their faith was visible to everyone in the room because it was evidenced by actions (works).

I am not trying to tear down the faith of any believer or put doubt in any person. I am trying to tear down the false doctrines that trap people in a powerless religion. It is loving to share with another person how to have peace with God through our Lord Jesus (Romans 5:1), however, it is callous and unloving to misrepresent the conditions God has given for people to be forgiven of their sins. Saving faith is whole-hearted and complete. The repentance acceptable to God is not partial or wavering, nor is the faith acceptable

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to God partial in what one believes or when one chooses to believe Him.

We, the church, need to be vocal and intentional in differentiating between casual or halfhearted faith and biblical faith. There is a very real contagion in the church of an ideology which leads people to believe they are in good standing with God simply because they affirmed the existence of God and Jesus. Invitations to turn to God followed by automatic assurances they are now saved fuel the proliferation of this ideology. We have metaphorically lowered the bar so low for people “to be saved” that making a decision for Christ is inconsequential to the day-to-day lives of so many.

If we are honest in our assessment, we can acknowledge the degradation of God’s standards of faith and repentance presented to the public at large. The church in general has diluted so much of God’s Word, doctrines, and conditions of His covenant with man that to be Christian is barely discernable from a person who is not.

A decision for Christ must be presented as a decision to follow Christ *as Lord* over one’s life. Believing in God needs to be defined and taught to include one’s actions (works) in life following what God presents in His Word. We need to amplify that a decision for Christ is the first step of a life-long commitment and journey in obeying God, not the end step for one’s salvation.

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APPLICATION

- Do you hear people reject teaching of obedience to God as legalistic or “works” righteousness?
- Have you been taught that works and faith were opposing principles?
- Recapture the language by correctly defining obedience to God as an essential element of the good works the Bible speaks much about.
- Boldly proclaim that true belief must contain obedience and defend that truth from those who attempt to label it as legalistic.

12

The Kingdom of God Is At Hand

I have a really good friend who was rebuked by several of his close friends in a church small group because he was challenging false doctrines and advocating teaching church goers to obey God's commandments. In defense of false traditions and false doctrines, the group excused ungodly living by professed believers in the church with a dismissive expression I have heard on numerous occasions myself — "Everybody is on their own journey." By the end of the meeting, my friend was labeled *legalistic* and a *Pharisee*.

At the heart of *everybody is on their own journey* is the false doctrine of unconditional grace, which fosters those who want to believe their soul is saved and have liberty to indulge fleshly desires. The deception of unconditional salvation is the source of reasoning within the church that people can be saved while living an unchanged life in willful sin. Because God's conditions and standards of His covenant have been wholly removed by this false doctrine, anyone proclaiming otherwise gets maligned as legalistic.

I want to expose the fallacy in the "everybody is on their own journey" response commonly used to summarily

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dismiss biblical truths. The flaws in this thinking are numerous and the outcomes laughable once you remove generalities and replace them with specifics. The whole purpose of that statement is to remove the legitimacy of biblical instruction, rebuke, correction, and discipleship from the conversation. By invoking this response, the individual is saying a wayward church goer should be left unhindered in his sinful ways rather than to be lovingly counseled (discipled) with biblical truths.

Let's remove the generalization from the platitude and insert a specific in its place. For this example, let's make murder the specific sinful action the rhetorical church member is actively doing. If my friend advocates that murdering someone is not acceptable to God and should not be condoned in the church, how laughable would it be if someone from his church small group responded that he shouldn't be legalistic because *everybody is on their own journey*?

Nobody would seriously think that killing people would be acceptable behavior for a professed believer. The pastor and congregation would be united in resolutely quoting God's commandment "You shall not murder" (Exodus 20:13) as a standard to be upheld by murderer John Doe in the church. They may even teach him that murderers will not inherit eternal life (1 John 3:15; Galatians 5:21; Revelation 21:8). I doubt there would be a casualness to this man's actions with sentiments of — "God loves him, and he's covered with grace. He just needs to walk his own journey."

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NOTE TO READER: God will forgive a *repentant* murderer. God will forgive **ALL** sins for anyone who sincerely repents (1 John 1:9; Titus 2:14; Matthew 12:31). The distinction of this example is the rhetorical murderer is actively and willfully doing this while claiming he is a believer in God.

Let's change the specific detail. Suppose serial rapist John Doe professes his belief in God, but afterwards he continues to rape teenage girls. Members of the small group discuss the meaning of grace in context of John Doe's situation, and one of the church members say, "God loves John Doe and His grace covers him. Everybody is on their own journey." That too would be a ludicrous statement in light of the fact that John Doe has not changed his sinful behavior at all.

In both examples of murderer John Doe and rapist John Doe, it is easy to determine the professions of faith were not sincere by the continued sinful actions of the two purported believers. Yet, notice how easily the perspective changes when we replace the sin detail with something more acceptable to our society. When a church goer professes belief in God and continues to practice covetousness or drunkenness, the church is quick to absolve him with false grace and shield him from correction with notions of *everybody is on their own journey*.

Scripture equates murder with both covetousness and drunkenness declaring all who practice those sins will take part in the second death (Galatians 5:20, 21; Revelation 21:8). Man, through the application of church traditions and doctrines, substitutes his own judgment in the place of God's to make covetousness, drunkenness, and many other

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sins acceptable actions for church goers. Consequently, covetousness now flourishes within so much of the modern church despite the fact the Holy Spirit directly classifies it as idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

The false doctrine of grace demands tolerance for willful sin on those who profess a belief in God and encourages smearing anyone who tries to teach obedience to God's commandments as legalistic or a Pharisee. An honest assessment of this thought exercise reveals the lack of equality in the distribution of grace in our examples derives from man's partiality toward one sin over another. Since man doesn't approve of murdering or raping teen age girls in church, he will stand firm upon the commandments of God. However, when the sin is more tolerable, common, or attractive, man apathetically responds with an attitude of *everybody is on their own journey*. The inconsistency in application of God's commandments is a product of man being the arbiter of what is right and what is wrong instead of God.

In reality, all three examples have the same structural problem — each circumstance has an individual who professes a belief in God but is unwilling to do what God commands. In actuality, these rhetorical people have *falsely* entered into a covenant relationship with God. The Holy Spirit speaks on this topic through the psalmist Asaph admonishing such an individual saying, "What right have you to...take My covenant in your mouth, seeing you hate instruction and cast my words behind you..." (Psalms 50:16, 17 NKJV). God is stating that the individual doesn't have the right to claim God's covenant because the individual

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discards God's commandments and instructions. Conversely, the psalm concludes with a promise of salvation "to him who orders his conduct aright" (Psalm 50:23 NKJV).

Man's part in the covenant with God is to love Him and obey His commandments. God is searching for a complete change of heart in man and will not accept a double-hearted relationship (James 1:8; Isaiah 29:13; Matthew 23:27; Psalms 73:36, 37; Ezekiel 33:31, 32). Actions in obeying God evidences a man's heart for God, while actions of willful sin (rebellion against God) reveals otherwise. Jesus substantiates the origin for a person's words and actions is one's own heart (Matthew 12:33-35 NKJV). God looks at the heart of man and judges accordingly (Psalm 7:9; Revelation 2:23; Proverbs 21:2; 1 Samuel 16:7; 1 Chronicles 28:9; Jeremiah 17:10). He considers those who come to Him in "pretense" (deceivingly; falsehood) less righteous than those who don't return to Him at all:

Yet for all this her treacherous sister **Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense,** declares the LORD."

And the LORD said to me, "**Faithless Israel has shown herself more righteous than treacherous Judah.** [ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Jeremiah 3:10, 11

The Bible records several times that God is faithful to keep His covenant with those who *love Him* and *keep His commandments* (2 Chronicles 6:14; 1 Kings 8:23; Nehemiah 1:5; Deuteronomy 7:9; Daniel 9:4; Psalms 103:17, 18; Exodus 20:6). These conditions for man, loving God and

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keeping His commandments, remain in the new covenant as well. Man can accept the conditions of God's covenant, or he can reject God's covenant. What man cannot do is negotiate or change the terms of God's covenant on his own accord.

A religious leader who offers another way into a covenant relationship with God other than sincere repentance from the heart is deceiving that person and leading him to hell. I believe the 2nd Commandment addresses this very issue:

You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.

— Exodus 20:7

Church tradition passed down through many generations teaches the 2nd commandment means man cannot use the word "God" in cussing. Even most non-Christians readily associate someone using "God" in a flippant curse as taking God's name in vain, however, that understanding is extremely limiting the scope of what the commandment is truly communicating. The commandment is saying anyone who claims to be God's but is lying has taken God's name in vain. Just like a bride takes the last name of the groom when she gets married and is known to all she meets as his wife, so too are people who claim to be believers in God taking God's name. A person who professes a belief in God and disingenuously repents is a person taking God's name in vain.

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There is a very ominous warning in that verse which requires serious consideration. God says He will judge a person as guilty who takes His name falsely. Since the Bible tells us all sins are forgiven by the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7), we can conclude the person who remains guilty would not be a person who was covered by Jesus' blood. So if a person takes God's covenant (His name) in vain, God will not cover him with the blood of His Son. A person not covered by the blood of Jesus is not saved from the wrath of God and remains condemned (Romans 5:9).

The word translated as "vain" is often defined to mean — falsely, lie, or lying.¹ A person's actions of willfully disobeying God would testify of that person's insincerity of heart. The concept of willful sin being described as "taking God's name in vain" is found in Scripture. Proverbs records the deliberate act of stealing (the 7th commandment) as taking the name of God in vain:

Lest I be full, and deny [thee], and say, Who [is] the LORD? or **lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God [in vain].** [EMPHASIS MINE]

– Proverbs 30:9 (KJV)

God doesn't hold people who ever stole something in their past guilty and unable to receive forgiveness. No, He holds those as guilty who take His covenant falsely. Do people who sincerely enter a covenant with God ever sin? Yes, and God forgives their sin (1 John 1:9). Don't conflate works righteousness with sincerity of heart. A sincere follower of Jesus doesn't lose his salvation if he sins. He is correctable and repentant. However, a sincere follower of Jesus doesn't live in deliberate, willful sin (John 8:12).

TWO GATES

Jesus introduced the narrative of the *narrow gate* and the *wide gate* as metaphors to contrast between true believers and those who only claim to follow Him. Many people think the two gates are describing the church and the unchurched, but that is simply not what is being addressed by Jesus in this chapter. Jesus gives voice to the people who are walking the wide gate quoting them calling Jesus “Lord” and recounting several religious works they claim to have done in Jesus’ name.

The wide gate is the religious church proclaiming Jesus while altering God’s commandments and testimonies through false teaching. Jesus informs us the wide gate is very popular, its path is easy, and its destination is destruction (Matthew 7:13). After telling His followers about the demise of those walking through the wide gate, Jesus warns them to “beware” of people who falsely speak God’s Word (Matthew 7:15). False doctrines and false traditions are the products from false religious leaders of which Jesus was alerting them to beware of. The majority of false doctrines make the gate wide by lowering God’s standards, removing His conditions, and making sin more acceptable.

The wide gate corrupts God’s justice, His love, and His sacrifice for man’s sins. God’s justice requires man to have a repentant heart, but the wide gate of religion only requires a token gesture of acknowledgement that Jesus existed. God’s love is to heal His children from the

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oppression, depravity, enslavement, and death of sin, but the wide way is unloving because it sanctions sinful actions trapping people in the slavery of sin and death. God sacrificed His only begotten Son on the cross to pay for the sins for all who truly repent, but the wide gate broadens access to include the unrepentant. Since obedience to God's will is so easily discarded by those who go through the wide gate, all who remain are destined for destruction instead of being healed and renewed.

Those in the wide way deceptively appropriate God's salvation for themselves and others without the need to significantly change one's sinful ways. What makes the wide gate easy are the negligible stipulations presented for a person to be saved and the removal of any enduring obligations. The wide gate uses church doctrines as giant erasers removing inconvenient commandments, disagreeable instructions, and burdensome standards of obedience from God's Word. In the end, Jesus rejects these people as "workers of evil" and reveals they will be forced to depart from Him to a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Luke 13:27, 28). It is not love to deceive people traveling the wide way with an affirming pat on the back saying *everybody is on their own journey*.

Conversely, Jesus said the narrow gate is difficult, it leads to life, and few people find it (Matthew 7:14). What makes the way narrow is God's requirement for us to do His will and follow His commandments. What makes the narrow way difficult is the complete and enduring submission of one's free-will to that of God's will in the form of a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1). The promise for

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the one who travels on this path is the salvation of Jesus. Teaching people about this path is true love.

The narrow gate is an entryway into God's kingdom. This kingdom isn't limited to a place we go after we die, it is a kingdom for the here and now as well. God's kingdom is a realm in which people can reside immediately in this life and enjoy the blessings, provision, and protection of God. Jesus' whole *Sermon on the Mount* is a dissertation on this topic and contains so much instruction for us on how to enter and live in God's kingdom. Jesus made the point about God's kingdom being available right now to us in this life when He was teaching His disciples how to pray:

Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

– Matthew 6:10

The first thing I want to point out is that Jesus connected God's kingdom coming with doing God's will. The second thing I wish to point out is Jesus was distinctly referring to this kingdom operating on earth (here and now) in similar fashion as to how it operates in heaven. Since Jesus used heaven as an example of how God's kingdom will operate on earth, we can conclude He is not speaking about the heavenly kingdom itself. Jesus is saying if we do God's will on earth, God's kingdom will come into our lives.

Pay close attention to the first words of Jesus recorded in the *Book of Mark*:

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, **proclaiming the gospel of God,**

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and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the **kingdom of God is at hand**; repent and believe in the gospel."
[ALL EMPHASIS MINE]

– Mark 1:14, 15

Mark defines the “gospel of God” (good news of God) by Jesus’ proclamation of “the kingdom of God is at hand.” Jesus is announcing that His arrival on earth has brought access for every single person on the planet entrance into God’s kingdom. The good news is mankind can now escape the bondage endured under the reign of the “god of this world” (2 Corinthians 4:4) and live out the rest of one’s earthly life under the loving and righteous reign of God by His Son Jesus, whom He made to be King on His behalf.

Before we go further, let’s not miss the forest for the trees. To better understand and appreciate the good news of God’s kingdom, we need to break down the meaning of the word *kingdom*. The word *kingdom* is a combination of two words — *king* and *dom*, with *dom* being short for domain. The word *kingdom* literally means — the domain of a king.

What does a king do? A king rules or reigns. A king doesn’t rule or reign some of the time when his subjects decide to agree with him. A king is not democratically chosen, influenced by public opinion polls, or manipulated by those he rules to satisfy the changing whims of the populous. A king’s reign is absolute and sovereign all the time. Any action contrary to the king’s reign, whether by his subjects or foreigners, would be considered rebellion worthy of being eradicated.

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So now, take a step back and relook at the good news which Jesus proclaimed at the start of His ministry — “the kingdom of God is at hand.” God’s kingdom is as close to me now as my hand is, and I can reach out and grab it. I can choose to be in God’s kingdom with Jesus as my king and walk right into it instantly. Jesus will install order, righteousness, peace, and joy (Romans 14:17) in my life by giving me wisdom, instruction, and guidance. When I follow Jesus, He will protect me from all evil intent of Satan and his evil spirits (1 John 5:18). In God’s kingdom, with Jesus as king, there is an overwhelming abundance of peace, joy, and love residing in every citizen.

There is no homelessness or starvation in God’s kingdom as He is an able and generous provider to His people (Matthew 6:33). There is no bitterness in God’s kingdom because His citizens have experienced the amazing power of God’s forgiveness for themselves and are commanded to extend their own forgiveness to each other (Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 6:14, 15; Matthew 18:35). People in God’s kingdom are not afflicted or controlled by anxiety because they have immediate access to their King for petitioning of their needs (Philippians 4:6, 7; 1 Peter 5:7). Residents in God’s kingdom constantly experience peace, joy, and love because His Spirit leads and empowers them (Galatians 5:22). There is no fear in God’s kingdom because it has been banished by His perfect love (1 John 4:18).

The citizens of God’s kingdom live an abundant life serving God and doing His will (John 10:10). The people in God’s kingdom get healed, blessed, and renewed because they follow King Jesus in all that He says. Obeying or

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disobeying Jesus is the measurement on whether you are in or out of God's kingdom. If one obeys King Jesus, he is walking the path from the narrow gate. If one alters, amends, or adjusts what King Jesus says to allow for his own will, then he is walking the path from the wide gate.

To further illustrate His teaching about the narrow and wide gates, Jesus tells a parable about two men who each build a house. The first man is wise and builds his house on a rock, while the second man is foolish and builds his house on sand. A vicious storm arrives with heavy rain causing flooding and fierce winds that beat upon both houses. The wise man's house stood strong, while the foolish man's house collapsed immediately. The key detail differentiating between the wise man and the foolish man was the wise man *did* what Jesus said to do, and the foolish man *did not do* what Jesus said to do:

WISE MAN -

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and **does them** [EMPHASIS MINE] will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

– Matthew 7:24, 25

FOOLISH MAN -

And everyone who hears these words of mine and **does not do them** [EMPHASIS MINE] will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand.

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And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

– Matthew 7:26, 27

People in church who hear Jesus' Words and do not do them are the foolish ones who are walking the wide and easy way. The people in church who hear Jesus' Words and do them are walking the path from the narrow gate. Doing what Jesus says is not legalistic, nor is it optional. It is the responsibility of the followers of Jesus to lovingly teach all people to "observe all that I (Jesus) have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

The wide and easy way from the wide gate and the church of Laodicea are synonymous in describing people who were deceived into believing they were right with God. Jesus said the Laodicean church thought they were rich and in need of nothing, but in actuality were "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 3:17). The people on the wide and easy way were also oblivious to their spiritual condition and were shocked to find out the door to heaven was shut for them (Luke 13:25). The Laodicean church were congregated together inside while Jesus was segregated outside knocking on the door asking to be let in (Revelation 3:20). The people on the wide and easy way were doing religious deeds in Jesus' name, and He responded that He didn't even know them (Matthew 7:23). Both the church in Laodicea and the wide and easy way describe people who proclaim Jesus, think they are saved, and are clueless about their impending destruction.

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For a church leader to acknowledge the state of the wide way being ever present within the church and not do or say anything to warn or correct the misled would be nothing less than accessory to the deception. If people in your congregation are walking through the wide gate and leadership's attitude is to ignore the situation, then that leadership is a contributor to their spiritual destruction. It would be as if a doctor observed a man about to board a plane on an overseas trip displaying symptoms of chest pain, shortness of breath, fatigue, and pain radiating in his arm, and did nothing to warn the man not to get on the plane and seek immediate medical attention. Knowing the truth about someone's impending doom and not warning that person has an eternal consequence:

If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and **you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way**, [EMPHASIS MINE] in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand.

– Ezekiel 3:18

Absolute truth is what is needed to correct the many false doctrines which lead people through the wide gate. Scripture states Jesus is truth (John 14:6), God's Word is truth (John 17:17), and knowing the truth sets people free (John 8:32). How does someone know the truth? He believes Jesus and abides (lives out) His Word (John 8:31). Abiding in all that God says to do through King Jesus is how the captives of sin are set free, healed, and transformed.

The church is supposed to be the lamp shining the light of Jesus to the world of darkness drawing sinners into

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God's kingdom. God's kingdom is a place where the hurt, the lonely, the sick, the abused, the fearful, the enslaved, the addicted, and the defenseless people of society desperately need to enter. Too often, the church, with its false doctrines and traditions, acts as a competing light, diverting the lost through the wide gate. Though they hear promises of the power of Jesus, people on the easy path repeatedly get mired in their own sin and do not experience the healing and transformational power of Jesus in their own lives.

Make the decision at this moment that you will take up the mission Jesus gave all His disciples. Resolve that you will disciple any person God brings across your path. Be diligent to distinguish the narrow gate from the wide gate by memorizing these four truths regarding the narrow gate:

BELIEF – (One must believe God and trust Him with one's life)

But without faith [it is] impossible to please [Him],
for he who comes to God must believe that He is,
[EMPHASIS MINE] and [that] He is a rewarder of
those who diligently seek Him.

– Hebrews 11:6 (NKJV)

REPENTANCE – (One must truly repent)

and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; **repent and believe** [EMPHASIS MINE] in the gospel."

– Mark 1:15

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OBEDIENCE – (One must make Jesus “Lord” and obey Him)

because, if you confess with your mouth that **Jesus is Lord** [EMPHASIS MINE] and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

– Romans 10:9

DISCIPLESHIP – (Live your entire life in His Word)

So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “**If you abide in my word**, [EMPHASIS MINE] you are truly my disciples,

– John 8:31

The narrow gate is Jesus and His Word (the entire Bible). Instead of a “sinner’s prayer” or an acknowledgement of God’s existence, we need to emphasize in the clearest way possible that you must BELIEVE God. Once you believe God, then you need to repent for living in rebellion to your Creator. Afterwards, and for the rest of your life, you must obey God by making Jesus Lord (authority) over all of your life. Finally, follow Jesus as one of His disciple and teach others to do the same.

Now...enter the KINGDOM OF GOD!

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About the Author



Rob Kimble is the founder and executive director of Discipleship Ranch Ministries—a ministry centered on making disciples of Jesus. Rob served in prison ministry at the Arkansas Community Correction Omega TVP prison 2011 – 2018 and the Garland County Detention Facility 2014 – 2024. Rob has ministered in several local faith-based recovery programs, has authored two books, participates in men’s ministry through a local church, and leads a community Bible study. He is married to his wife Danielle and has two daughters.