

Congregational Leadership

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Lesson One

Who Will Lead You Closer To God?

Text: 1 Peter 2:1-10

American Christians exist in an extremely complex society. In a country that experiences a fifty-percent divorce rate among first marriages, open live-together arrangements though not married, sex for recreation, and open homosexuality, how is relationship commitment to be defined? In a country that declares uncaught white collar thefts are acceptable, but stealing is a crime even if uncaught, how is loyalty in the workplace defined? When greed is an acceptable motive for human acts, how is a work ethic defined? When it is okay to defy the intent of a contract on the basis of a technicality, how is honesty to be defined? When the unsuspecting and vulnerable become the victims of scams, how is integrity defined?

For most people, everyday existence produces a barrage of ethical decisions and attacks on moral acts. Many by the age of 30 have faced situations they never dreamed existed at the age of 13. Many who swear “that will never happen in my life” eventually have it happen in their lives. Many are reeling from societies’ attacks and fear of what tomorrow may bring. In no way is the American world of today the American world of fifty years ago. No age is perfect, but there is an openness to and sanctioning of the undesirable as never before in our society.

What are people to do? In spite of what we may think or verbally declare, there are no quick fixes or easy solutions. We can run away, pretend all is okay, or suggest simple solutions to complex problems. We may not like the situation, but there will be no substitute for personal strength, endurance, or personally living by standards that cause society to be questioning and skeptical. In many instances, social popularity will not be one of the options we are provided.

In these complex times of too many awkward decisions, where do we go for encouragement? Where can we forget the past and begin again? Where will we find comfort in sorrow? Where can those we love encounter second chances? When we struggle, where can we find hope instead of being shoved deeper into the mire of life? Where can we be among people who would rather help us than exploit us?

The number one place that people should turn is to a congregation of Christians!

Quite soon, you will be selecting elders for this congregation. These men, in this demanding task, will determine in significant ways the spiritual environment of this congregation. Yet, none of these men will serve us in this role without our personal, collective approval. Elders serve in the role of elders through our request and approval. Please, do not take your nominations and your approval lightly. (Some of the following information is found in the book, *If You Want to Be a Shepherd, Walk In the Pasture*, found free at www.davidchadwell.com and on [West-Ark's website](#). You are encouraged to read it.)

One environment that leadership in a congregation should encourage should be the environment of personal spiritual growth. The author of Hebrews was not able to share all the lessons concerning Melchizedek because his Christian readership had failed to grow (consider Hebrews 5:11-6:8). The writer classified repentance, faith, washings, laying on of hands, resurrection, and eternal judgment as elementary teachings.

Spiritual growth sounds simple, but it is not. Obviously, there are many advantages to the growth that produces maturity. Those advantages can be illustrated in the ways a person can live (chronologically endure) but not mature (not be able to mentally develop).

There are definite advantages to spiritual growth which results in spiritual maturing.

1. Wise personal decisions result from such spiritual growth.
2. Informed choices result from such spiritual growth.
3. Improved ethics and moral actions result from such spiritual growth.
4. Better relationships of all types result from such spiritual growth.
5. Improved lifestyles result from such spiritual growth.
6. Characteristics such as forgiveness, compassion, kindness, etc., result from such spiritual growth.

However, like all maturing, this maturing involves prices.

1. Decisions will involve struggle.
2. Growth demands change as understanding deepens and advances.
3. One recognizes immaturity when he or she sees it—even when it is in self.
4. Tolerance must be exercised.
5. Respect must rule actions.
6. The immature must be allowed to mature—and not on your timetable.

Producing an environment in which people spiritually can grow and develop is not simple! This challenge is one of the greatest that elders will face! Choose men you trust to guide you closer to God. Choose men who are spiritually mature! Realize they may “stretch” your understanding biblically as they seek to lead you closer to God!

Discussion Questions

1. Why should elders be spiritually mature?
2. In the average person, what are the challenges to spiritual growth?

3. What are the benefits of spiritual growth?
4. Why do you think that many resist spiritual growth?
5. Would you personally enjoy being in a congregation with a growth environment? Why or why not?
6. What are the alternatives to a congregational environment of spiritual growth?
7. Do you think elder selection is a serious matter? Why or why not?
8. What difficulties would an elder face in promoting spiritual growth?
9. What joys would an elder receive in promoting spiritual growth?

Lesson Two

The “More” Than

Texts: 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9

This lesson *in no way* wishes to detract from the things said about elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. *In no way* is it in opposition to the qualities of the men who would be appointed to serve the early church as elders. The lesson suggests that there are things to be considered that go beyond those statements. Though those passages say nothing about the person being a believer in Jesus Christ who is penitent and has been immersed into Jesus Christ, surely that should be a necessary consideration. Though they do not reference the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22, 23 or the spiritual growth qualities in 1 Peter 1:5-11, both would be important considerations.

Remember, the qualities mentioned in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 dealt with spiritual needs and considerations that dealt with living in a thoroughly idolatrous society 2000 years ago. This was before our modern-day preoccupations of owning land, building buildings, constructing parking lots, maintaining multiple programs, etc.

The emphasis in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 is on a spiritual person. Neither passage contains a job description. Give attention to these facts: (1) The emphases are on spirituality in relationships and on the values that controlled who the man was. (2) Both of these would set the men apart from their unspiritual society. (3) They would not react to nor handle problems in ways their society commonly reacted to or handled problems.

The combination of those three things would of necessity mean spiritually mature persons should lead congregations. Such people would lead the Christians who composed congregations to higher (and often new) concepts of spirituality. These men were not chosen to confirm the desires of the converts, but to confirm God’s values. They were the kind of men who would stabilize homes and champion new husband-wife-child relationships. Their society rejected and often abandoned unwanted infants, saw marriage as an arrangement of convenience, often regarded wives as servants, often used force to settle disputes, often resorted to injustice to win, and often sought to prove manliness through indulgence. The spiritual men selected to be elders did not share society’s views!

How did an elder do this in a society that basically rejected his positions? Did he do it by verbally ”laying down the law” and by “using the force of position” to demand congregational control? Neither passage suggests this as a course of action. Have you considered 2 Timothy 2:24-26 lately?

If they did not do seek control by verbal harassment but through being what they advocated, if they led people to new values in God by being what they advocated, these men were examples who served God. They were not power brokers—they were stewards (trusted, leading servants) of the only power broker—Jesus Christ.

At the risk of having an un-American philosophy, is that the fast way to do things? No! However, it is the spiritually constructive way to do things. Observations: (1) Christians who demand leaders who control rather than leaders who are examples frequently leave congregations whose leaders refuse to control. (2) Christians who favor leadership by control only favor leadership by control if their desires determine the direction of the control.

As you seek spiritual leadership in this congregation, consider these things:

1. Select men who are committed to Jesus Christ first (who honor no close second choice).
2. Select men who are obviously spiritual in their relationships and the values in control of their lives.
3. Select men whose spirituality you respect and whose lives you respect.
4. Select men who are respected—though perhaps disagreed with—by those not in the congregation.
5. Select men who learn and are willing to learn.
6. Select men you trust to lead you to understandings beyond those you held in the past.
7. Select men who care about people who are hurting because of people's failures.
8. Select men who are dedicated to serving.
9. Select men who refuse pressure and are not reactionary.
10. Select men who are not afraid of nor are ruled by their mistakes.

Selecting men to serve as elders must not be reduced to a mere popularity contest.

Elders are not perfect men. Perfect people do not exist. They are spiritually mature men who never cease drinking from the spring of God's wisdom. Will you always agree with them? No! That is why you must respect and trust them. That is why you must know that they belong to Jesus Christ first in all matters.

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9 contain all relevant considerations in determining who should and should not be an elder? Why or why not?
2. What do you think is the emphases of those two scriptures?
3. How do our society of today and that society of "then" differ?
4. Do you think those differences make an elder's work more difficult, less difficult, or about the same in difficulty? Explain your answer.
5. Explain the difference between a "control" and an "example" approach to leadership.
6. Can a congregation be led as though it were a business? Why or why not?
7. Discuss how the American society feels about fast resolution of challenges/problems.
8. Of the ten leadership suggestions given for consideration, which do you think is the most important? Why? Which do you think is the least important? Why?
9. Were you to make a suggestion other than those ten, what would you suggest?
10. How can we encourage spiritual men to be elders?
11. What have you learned about selecting leadership as a result of these discussions?

Lesson Three

Things to Consider

These are very complex times in which to be an elder! Providing leadership for most local congregations is a challenging task! The following does NOT suggest there are no joys in being an elder. It is presented for two reasons. (1) It is presented to invite members of the congregation to think. Make your expectations and demands “doable” by facing reality. Consider some simple examples. For elders, in any way to “discipline” any man or woman (no matter what the act) who is not “a member” or who “has withdrawn membership” can open the eldership to a civil suit that, under the right circumstances, can subject all the congregational leadership to significant damages. Would you care to decide the thorny issue of who is and is not a “member”? Should only “members” be included in the directory or in mailouts? Should “membership” include more than attendance? Or, if the elders or anyone on the congregation’s staff provides “advice” considered counseling, and the “advice” causes “damage” to the person or persons, again the “offending party” (in the appropriate circumstances) can be sued. Would you care to decide if this possibility should be insured or how much insurance should be carried? Some “simple matters” are not nearly as simple as people in the congregation think!

(2) It is presented to challenge those who would be elders to have realistic expectations. Being an elder does not mean a person “can do anything he wants in any way he wishes.” The objective must be realistic! The purpose must be realistic! The method or means must be legal! Because a congregation is a church does not mean it can ignore the law. The time demands on the volunteer leaders are too great to be unnecessarily spent in IRS hearings or in courtrooms.

American congregations exist in a complex society. Besides following godly values, besides determining and adopting godly principles, besides letting Jesus Christ teach us how to live for God, building codes must be followed, appropriate permits must be obtained, and applicable laws must be embraced. Gone are the days when people can do as they think is best because “we are a church.” In this current society, being a church can be a disadvantage. Many people do not regard any “organized religion” as a good thing in a community—which in itself provides us another challenge we must meet and meet well.

Consider ten challenges elders must face in the current American society that extend beyond the complexities of the spiritual challenges of being Christian.

1. The reality of a multi-cultural society
2. The reality of multi-generational desires
3. The reality of the consumer mentality
4. The reality of ignorance of scripture and questioning any authority
5. The reality of diverse expectations
6. The reality of economic stress
7. The reality of a critical society
8. The reality of expecting elders to intuitively know members’ needs
9. The reality of the negative image many Christians have toward elders
10. The reality of determining who are and are not members

Again, these ten things do not begin to deal with the doctrinal disagreements or the divisions that exist in our “back to the Bible” movement.

If you are inclined to discount the validity of the ten things mentioned, consider just our multi-cultural society. What language will be the congregation’s dominant language? Will translation be allowed? Can there be a sign language ministry? What customs will prevail? Can there be exceptions? How should differing marriage relationships be counseled? How should differing parent-child relationships be addressed? How should perceived spiritual developmental needs be addressed? How should we go about providing classes for adults and children? What classes should be taught? What security should be provided? How should security be provided? How are the importance of cultural values interpreted? How do we recognize differing expressions of respect and dignity? How do we understand what is offensive?

Do you realize that we have a Caucasian and a Laotian congregation meeting in the facilities? Is that what we should do—share facilities? Can there be two elderships and one facility? Do you realize we built the Hispanic building and in a large way support that ministry? Is that an independent outreach or a part of this congregation? Is that what we should do—provide separate facilities? In all of this, what does God want?

Do you understand that we have Laotian members, Hispanic members, African-American members, Native American members, and Caucasian members (and likely more) in one assembly on Sunday mornings? It is NOT, “We will deal with that need when it happens”—it (thank God!) is happening!

What are the joys of being an elder? The joy of witnessing spiritual growth in a person. The joy of seeing such generosity. The joy of seeing differing groups of Christians pursuing peace in Christ. The joy of seeing believers quietly meeting needs. The joy of seeing Christians volunteer. The joy of being a part of God’s work in a truly special way. The joy of being encouraged by some incredible people totally devoted to God. The joy of being part of a very unselfish group. The joy of witnessing the incredible happen. The joy of seeing someone deep in need gratefully rising above that need—and then helping others. The joy of serving God in a very unique way. The joy of being part of something far bigger and more important than you are. The joy of seeing God working in so many ways at once. You should listen to your elders describe the joys!

Discussion Questions

1. How would you explain that these are complex times to provide leadership for a congregation?
2. Being an elder is a volunteer work. What does an elder do that requires time other than meeting in a class or worship assembly? Most elders work in full-time jobs. From what does the volunteer time come? Who makes the time sacrifices for a man to be a responsible elder?
3. Consider the ten suggested challenges to congregational leadership in our society. What do you consider to be among the most complex non-spiritual challenge to providing congregational leadership in today’s society?
4. How should Christians in a congregation encourage qualified men to be elders? How do Christians discourage qualified men from considering being an elder? (Private thought question: how do you encourage or discourage qualified men who consider being elders?)
5. Share with each other the joys of serving a congregation as an elder.

Lesson Four

Two Views

How will Christians react to the real threats and assaults on Christian spirituality in our area, our society, our nation, and our international world? How will we defend ourselves from our paranoia that thinks “everybody is against us?” How will we move toward a balance that sees reality but does not exaggerate danger? Where is that balance? Who determines balance?

These days it seems that many Christians and many congregations struggle between two issues: (1) seeing threats to Christian spiritual existence, AND (2) a paranoid thinking that sees threats that either do not exist or at best are speculations. Christians do not wish to ignore reality. They do not wish to be paranoid. They wish to live a balanced lifestyle that in everything trusts God’s values.

The issue: how do Christians find and cling to God’s balance? If Christians ignore real dangers, they invite unnecessary suffering. If Christians exaggerate dangers, they become blind to genuine opportunities. If either happens, Christians will not fulfill their mission in Christ. They will increasingly turn inward and increasingly become spiritually ineffective.

Thus, balance should be determined by spiritually mature people. Congregations are blessed when led by spiritually mature men who understand the balance produced by spiritual maturity, who “see” that balance, and who point the congregation in the direction of that balance.

This balance is not necessarily seen by the spiritually immature. It is often rejected by the paranoid who are controlled by terror. It is commonly derided by those who have a lot of knowledge, but who do not grasp God’s values. It is typically opposed by those who refuse to exist by faith in Christ. There is always a threat that some in the congregation will not “see” what spiritually mature, qualified leadership “sees.”

Often, in a very real way, the Christians who compose a congregation are the victims of today’s American lifestyle. We have lived well and lived with ease. Because of our prosperity, we have and use things many in the world would not know existed if we did not have them. Most of us are not accustomed to a daily struggle caused by being deprived. Most of us thought future generations in our families would live better than we do. We have not known economic privation. We have not known being denied an education. We have not known a life without discretionary funds. There always could be “progress” if the individual just applied himself or herself. Opportunities were so abundant that the question facing many people was, “Which opportunity do I accept?”

“Now” that is not the situation. We are reminded by many circumstances that “things could worsen long before they get better.” How will we adjust? What does all this mean to congregations? Can good spiritual circumstances abound only if an excellent lifestyle is available? Does being spiritual depend on material convenience?

There are basically two approaches to a perceived threatening environment. The first is an isolation approach. It might be referred to as a “close the castle” or “defend the fort” mentality. This view focuses on all that “we” do not wish to happen. The focus may be on our children that we do not wish to abandon the church. The focus may be on “those people” that we do not want in “our” congregation. The focus may be on problems we do not wish to address. The focus may be on lifestyles and habits we reject.

The focus can be on many different concerns. However, the answer is typically the same: “Keep the concern ‘out there.’ Isolate the congregation from the problem. If anyone ‘in here’ has the problem, get rid of them—there is no place in the congregation for such people.” Thus, all in the congregation must see the world in the same way, must define right and wrong in the same way, must believe that isolation is always the answer, and must defend “our thinking/values” at all costs.

The second approach is to refuse to see the church as a castle or fort. Isolation is not the solution, but sharing Jesus’ light is the solution. Rather than a defense mentality, there is a sharing mentality. Too few hours are spent in church buildings wherein Christians are the majority. Exposure to the population of our society is unavoidable. Being a part of a child’s world with involvement in education and being a part of an adult’s world with job involvement will expose everyone—child or adult—to society and its values. Christianity is not a way to avoid evil but a way to triumph over evil.

Choices cannot be eliminated and temptation cannot be destroyed by isolation. The problem of evil is not merely “out there,” but it is a problem within people as well. Being a Christian is a chosen way to live by faith in Jesus Christ, not a way to hide from evil. Jesus had no desire to remove his disciples from the world. He just had no desire for them to define life by that which opposes God. See John 17:15-21. It is impossible to be Jesus’ light as his followers and have no contact with darkness. See Matthew 5:14-16.

Obviously, both views can be exaggerated. A congregation needs leadership that avoids unnecessary spiritual danger, yet challenges Christians to function as spiritual light in all aspects of life. The question is not what we want. The question is what does God through Jesus Christ want. The Christian focus is not on our human desires, but on God’s objectives in Jesus Christ. Congregations need the leadership of spiritually mature men who understand God’s objectives.

Discussion Questions

1. How does evil attack Christians in today’s existence?
2. In the battle of good vs. evil, how do congregations struggle today?
3. Discuss the need for spiritual balance in a congregation’s struggles with evil.
4. How does the American lifestyle work against being Christian?
5. Does spirituality depend on material convenience?
6. Explain and evaluate the “close the castle” or “defend the fort” mentality.
7. What problem or problems exist with the isolation approach?
8. Explain and evaluate the “being light in a dark world” mentality.
9. What problem or problems exist with the “light” approach?
10. How does this situation illustrate the need for spiritually mature leadership?

Lesson Five

The Force of Congregations As Leaders

Texts: 1 Thessalonians 1:2-7; 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Congregations of Christians can have a powerful positive (or negative) influence as congregations. That does not mean everyone in a congregation is good and spiritually mature or bad and spiritually immature. Consider 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4 as compared to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-12 and consider Revelation 3:1-6 as examples. Evidently the congregation at Thessalonica had a powerful (good) influence as a congregation (consider 1 Thessalonians 1:8). Evidently the congregation in Sardis had a powerful negative influence, discouraging others who placed faith in Jesus Christ, because they claimed to be spiritually alive but were spiritually dead.

[Christians in the first century often used the word “church” in some ways we of today do not use it. For example, what we commonly refer to as a “congregation” they might call a “church.”]

Most Christians are familiar with the importance of a congregation’s reputation. If you as a Christian are visiting, you likely will be asked, “Where do you attend church?” If you respond to that question and your response meets with silence, it usually means one of two things. Either the asker never heard of that congregation, or the asker is trying politely to ignore your response. If the asker responds in a disapproving fashion, “Oh—you go there,” the asker has a negative view of “that congregation.” If the asker responds, “I have heard about your wonderful mission work (or benevolent work, or inner-city outreach, etc.)” the asker has a positive view of what the congregation is known for. Regardless of the response or if the response is correct, you are reminded that the congregation’s reputation has an immediate impact on others and on you. A congregation does lead through its work and the reputation that work generates!

Consider today’s texts. In the two letters to the congregation in Thessalonica, this congregation was widely known for the loving way they cared for each other. Faith in Jesus Christ drew them together. Every congregation in a large area knew them. Even Christians they did not know heard about them. This congregation was so well known for its faith and love that Paul did not need to say to other Christians, “Have you heard about the relationships in the congregation at Thessalonica?” (See 1 Thessalonians 1:8.)

However, this congregation was not known for its correct understanding of the resurrected Jesus’ return. They thought if a Christian died before Jesus Christ returned, the Christian lost his eternal blessings (see 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). They were convinced that Jesus Christ was returning soon (see 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5).

Their misunderstandings of Jesus Christ’s return contributed significantly to their problems. Some Christians concluded there was no need to have a job because others would take care of them until Jesus returned. Some of these Christians lived undisciplined lives (idleness often results in foolish involvements and thoughtless decisions). Some had so much time that they meddled in others’ affairs (idle people tend to be full of “expert advice”). Some knew too much about everyone, so they filled their time with gossip and gossiping (the “I know more than you know” attitude tends to invent things to say best left unsaid).

Two things are worthy of notation and remembrance. (1) Christians everywhere can be wonderfully correct about some things and woefully wrong about others. We all are a mixed bag of correct and incorrect. We are not accepted by God because we are 100% correct, but because we are forgiven. Read 1 John 1:5-10 and be sure to note verse 10. All of us need forgiveness—continually!

(2) There is always room for spiritual growth and development! No matter how correct we are about some matters, we can be certain that we are misguided in other matters. Do not allow your ignorance or your convictions to deceive you! Always be willing to learn and to grow.

In 2 Corinthians 8, congregations in unbelievable poverty taught congregations much better off about the attitude of generosity. These Christians were so poor that Paul saw them as candidates for Christian benevolence. They amazed Paul. Why? They refused to be left out of a gift to those in need in Jerusalem. They did not merely give sacrificially. Paul said they gave what they should not have given.

Why did they act this way? They had first given themselves to the Lord. When they understood what Paul sought to do, they understood how that act could achieve God's will. Because they belonged to the Lord, they had to be involved—even if involvement meant giving what they had no business giving.

Their poverty only heightened the power and impressiveness of what they did. Their example still teaches us 2000 years later what it means to belong to the Lord.

The number one point: congregations lead by influencing other Christians in other places through the attitudes and the works of those congregations. Personally, use your life and your involvements to allow your congregation to be a positive encouragement to Christians in other places. Help the congregation be a people that others in the community wish to be in—may we attract people to Jesus Christ by revealing the positive impact Jesus Christ has on us.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Is every person in a good congregation good or in a bad congregation bad? Use 2 Thessalonians 1:3, 4 compared to 3:6-12 and use Revelation 3:1-6 as an illustration.
2. Use this lesson to illustrate that first-century Christians did not always use "church" as we do.
3. Discuss the importance of a congregation's reputation.
4. The congregation at Thessalonica was known for what? How well known was it for these positive qualities?
5. For what was this congregation NOT known? What did they think would happen to Christians who died before Jesus' return?
6. When did they think the resurrected Jesus would return?

7. Discuss 4 ways this incorrect understanding of Jesus' return significantly impacted their error.

8. What two things are worth noting and remembering?

a.

b.

9. Discuss the poor congregations in 2 Corinthians 8.

Lesson Six

The Leadership of Christian Individuals

Text: 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Begin this lesson with a reading of the text. The initial points made in the lesson will come from this reading. It is important that you realize the observations are not speculation, but an unfolding of scripture itself.

One of Paul's favorite analogies in his writings is that of the human body. He frequently used this illustration. Paul used the same illustration to apply his point in Romans 12:3-8. Paul made reference to the body in 1 Corinthians 10:17; Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 1:22, 23; 2:16; 4:4, 14-16; and Colossians 2:19, 3:15. Paul even declared all Christians become a part of Christ's body through baptism (Romans 6:3-11; 1 Corinthians 12:13). He declared the Christian's body becomes God's temple (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Thus that which housed evil became God's house. The writer of Hebrews said no matter the circumstance of the individual Christian, the person in Christ is still a part of the body (Hebrews 13:3).

In Paul's extended analogy in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, note these points:

1. Just as a person's physical body is composed of many parts, the same is true of Christ's body (those in Christ are parts who compose Christ's body).
2. Everyone who is a Christian (regardless of lineage, heritage, or circumstance) is nourished by the same spiritual food.
3. Because one member of Christ's body cannot function in the way another member of Christ's body functions does NOT mean they do not need each other or are not needed by the body.
4. In the first-century church, God decided (ultimately) what role in the body each person served.
5. The divine intention was to produce a BODY and not merely ONE PART of a body that served a single function.
6. A body has multiple functions, but a body part many have a restricted function.
7. The objective of body parts is to function for the preservation of the body, not to reject each other because all body parts do not have the same function.
8. Some body parts have high profile—"publicly appreciated"—functions, and some body parts have low profile—"not-to-be-openly-talked-about"—functions.
9. There is no place in Christ's body for one part to arrogantly claim superiority because "my" function is more important—and honorable—than "your" function.

10. The point is **not** what others say of how you serve, but what does **God** say of how you serve.

11. God never intended for all Christians to serve Him in the same capacity by doing the same thing.

12. Showing love is more valued by God than a “showy and obvious” spiritual gift.

Following will be some observations you are challenged to consider.

Observation one: Individual Christians must consider God’s objectives through the church collectively and through Christ as being more important than their personal desires. (1) It is simple to substitute a personal desire for an objective of God. We can want something so badly (that of itself may appear to be good) that we can assume it is God’s objective. (2) It is easy to assume that if “we” want it, God must want and value “our” objective. God’s objectives are to be discovered through scripture, not assumed by human beings. Because “I” value something does not automatically mean God values the same thing. (3) Example: people often emphasize the dramatically obvious (such as miracles, healings, or tongues) while God values demonstrating love. Are you not glad (in your own life) that God values demonstrating love? Where would you be if divine love did not produce forgiveness, mercy, and grace? Do you realize that forgiveness is rarely dramatic? Showing love is more difficult and demanding than showing power.

Observation two: Serving God’s purpose may have little to do with what you personally would prefer to do. The idea that serving God’s purposes is pleasurable should be dispelled by a number of biblical people. Consider just a few. Consider Moses by reading Exodus 3-4:17 and Exodus 5:15-23. Consider Jeremiah by reading Jeremiah 20:17-18 and 38:1-10. Consider Jesus in Matthew 26:36-44. Consider Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:22-23 and 2 Timothy 4:7-18. It is amazing how often people do not find fulfillment in what they can do well. Why do we assume, “If I can do it, anyone can do it. I wish to do something others cannot do!”

Observation three: Today in the American society, the praise of God is so performance based in the Sunday morning assembly, that many do not feel “important” unless they have a high profile role in the Sunday morning worship assembly. The object of worship is the praise of God, not the demonstration of personal ability. In Paul’s body analogy, service to God occurs 24 hours a day, seven days a week. There are no restrictions or time limitations on showing love to others and meeting the needs of others. The object of serving God is NOT impressing people. True, you wish to be an example whose involvements encourage people, but you do not seek to impress them with you but with the God who enables you (consider Matthew 5:16). The Christian serves God’s objectives because he or she is impressed with God, not the praise of people. Christians do “it” for God. They serve Him in love of Him. They serve others because, of first importance, they love Him.

Observation four: The overriding concern of Christians is the well-being of Christ’s body **because** God’s work and values are evident in that body. The collective influence of Christians is the fact that God is at work in them to achieve His eternal objectives.

For Thought and Discussion

1. How does this lesson begin? Why did it begin in this way? Did you?
2. What was one of Paul's favorite analogies?
3. What did the writer of the book of Hebrews declare in 13:3?
4. State the 12 points from 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 listed in this lesson.

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)
- 6)
- 7)
- 8)
- 9)
- 10)
- 11)
- 12)

5. What was observation one?
6. What was observation two?
7. What was observation three?
8. What was observation four?

Lesson Seven

The God Who Sees In Secret

Text: Matthew 6:1-18

Of the many lessons that occur in the lesson text for today, the one drawn to your attention is Jesus' concept of God. Many problems existed in the Jewish religious mindset. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus pointed to many of those problems: their failure to grasp that the focus of righteousness began with an internal emphasis; their failure to understand why they followed God; their failure to understand the focus of divine law; their failure to focus law correctly; their failure to do righteous acts for correct motives; their failure to find eternal security in the correct focus; and their failure to understand the purpose of godliness. The foundation of all their incorrect understandings of righteousness was an incorrect view of God.

An incorrect view of God warps every act of obedience, every effort of spiritual service, and every attempt to praise God. Consider today's text. The basic thrust in the text is this: in righteous acts, one's motives are extremely important to God. Or, stated in another way, why a person does a righteous act is as important to God as the act itself. Thus, if the primary motive for doing a righteous act is a selfish, self-serving motive, the act—no matter what it is—is not considered by God to be a godly act. For example, if you did what you did to receive human attention, when you received such attention you achieved your objective. You received what you sought in your deed. Since you did not do it for God, God will not respond to the act. In effect, you received what you wanted, and God "owes" you nothing. When you received what you sought, you were "paid in full." You are not entitled to a divine dividend.

To illustrate his point, Jesus used three common religious acts expected of every godly Jew. These three acts were in the foundation of a first-century godly person in Judaism: almsgiving (benevolence), prayers, and fasting. These three were so fundamental to godliness that NO ONE could be considered godly if he (she) did not do these things. Yet, Jesus said in all three things one's view of God was fundamental to these being accepted by God.

One's view of God? In what way? (1) The person understood that God saw acts even when no human saw the act. (2) God was neither deceived nor manipulated by human deeds. (3) God's character determined human acts.

The world of the first century did not believe in one God. Idolatry, with rare exceptions, believed in many gods. Idolatry in general did not care how many gods a person worshipped—people generally were expected to worship more than one god. In fact the worship of multiple gods was not strange, but worshipping only one God was strange. Thus, tiny Judaism was strange, and later, growing Christianity was strange for the same reason. At times, worshipping one God to the exclusion of others gods was looked upon as an expression of atheism!

In this view of gods, the more "showy" the deed the more likely people were to attract favorable attention from the god or goddess. Gods were not naturally interested in human affairs. Gods could be manipulated. Gods were more likely to hurt than help people.

Jesus said human deeds do not gain God's attention through "showy" acts. God is naturally interested not just in human affairs but in human individuals. The purpose of prayer is not to inform God. Human motives cannot be hidden from God—even if the human wished to hide motives.

Do you realize that if Christians today understood these things about God that these understandings would radically transform congregations now? God knows good that occurs in secret. God does not need flattery or information (there is an enormous need to grasp the difference between flattery and praise). God cannot be manipulated. God's character determines our actions.

Consider all the changes that would occur IF Christians understood (1) God knows human needs before human requests are made. (2) God's interest in us is natural. (3) Humans never manipulate God. (4) There does not have to be human knowledge before there is divine knowledge. (5) Christians do what they do because they know and appreciate God's character.

What if there were no more attempts to bargain with God that said, "God, if You will just do Y I promise I will do X." Or, no more attempts to get God to behave in certain ways because we do certain acts. Or, feeling the necessity to inform God because He does not know. What if we forgave others, showed compassion, and had mercy because we valued God's forgiveness, compassion, and mercy?

Among the many things that would abound would be this: Christian leadership on every level would abound. Why? Christians would do things for God in the confidence that God saw all that occurred. There would be no big "I's" and little "you's" because every act of godliness would be important. Impressing others with what we do would be unnecessary and irrelevant. Appreciating God's true character would become all consuming as Christians appreciated God for who He is.

Would you consciously use your life to lead through service if you did it for God first and people second because you valued God?

For Thought and Discussion

1. What lesson in the text is drawn to your attention?
2. In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), Jesus pointed to what failures?
3. What was at the foundation of all their incorrect understandings about righteousness?
4. What does an incorrect view of God do?
5. What is the basic thrust of today's text?
6. What three common religious acts did Jesus use as illustrations? Why?
7. What three things did Jesus declare about God?

a.

b.

c.

8. Discuss the general views of idolatry in the first-century world.

9. Discuss Jesus' view of God.

10. What changes would occur in congregations if Christians understood Jesus' view of God?

11. Would you lead through service if you understood and believed Jesus' view of God?

Lesson Eight

Christian Influence

Texts: Matthew 5:14-16; 1 Peter 2:11, 12

The lesson will focus primarily on the two texts. You are encouraged to read both texts before we begin our thinking.

Begin by examining your religious foundation for your thoughts/actions. As a Christian, do you believe two worlds actually exist simultaneously? “What two worlds?” The physical and the spiritual worlds are the two worlds. Do you believe one is temporary and one is continual? The physical world as we know it is temporary. The physical world as we know it had a beginning and will have an end. The physical world as we know it contains two powerful influences—the influences of good and the influences of evil. It was the influences of evil that perverted the existence and purpose of the physical world.

The spiritual world existed before the physical world existed. The spiritual world exists now. The spiritual world will continue to exist after the physical world as we know it ceases. In fact, the spiritual world challenges our thinking—it is without beginning or end, and we do not experience things in our physical world without beginning or end.

God’s intention for the physical world was that it would exist in genuine compatibility with the spiritual world (Genesis 1:31; 3:8). Evil perverted the intent of God in the physical creation. The physical world as you and I know it is not the physical world God brought into being.

The issue or question is this: should we invest ourselves and our lives in a world that is temporary or a world that is continuing? As 2 Peter 3:11, 12 states it, “. . . (W)hat sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God . . .” (NASV)? Please notice that the issue is not **them** (those who do not place their trust in what God did and does through Jesus Christ). The issue is **us** (those who trust what God did and does through Jesus Christ by entering Jesus Christ). In words we use more frequently, if we Christians understand this physical world is temporary, do we truly exist for the coming reality that will not end?

How do Christians live for the reality of the spiritual world? How will we live if we understand this physical world is temporary? Some of these answers are given in today’s texts.

The first text (Matthew 5:14-16) is in Jesus’ words. Jesus said God’s followers realize the example of their lives and priorities are essential. The illustration Jesus used was light. In our society, we often take light for granted. Not so in their world! Life and work began at sunup and ended at sundown. Why? They could see what they were doing! They had light!

As much as is possible, illustrate two things. (1) Illustrate how small first-century lamps were. It would be quite necessary to elevate the lamp without obstructions to provide even a dim light in a dark room. (2) Illustrate how important light is—always!

We of today in this society would regard their artificial lighting of little value. The typical lamp of that time would fit in the palm of a hand. Oil (often olive oil) and a crude wick provided a dim light in darkness. If the light was elevated, people could see how to get about a room without stumbling. Because most people were extremely poor and artificial lights were regarded to be expensive, such light was welcomed but used sparingly. Darkness was for sleeping until the sun shone again.

Jesus used the obvious to form his illustration. People light a lamp to be able to see. It is being able to see that allowed people to avoid injury. Do good works so people can “see” the value of doing good. Do good works in rightful ways that make it obvious that your good exists because God directs your life. Your good is done to glorify God.

The Christian example of how to live for God is an essential function of people who belong to and follow the living God. Jesus gave this emphasis before he gave his life and was resurrected. This example always has been true of people who belong to and follow the living God in every age. Such people serve the essential function of reflecting God’s light in a world darkened by evil. Never assume that people automatically understand how to distinguish good from evil. People who do not know God also do not “see” or understand evil.

Following God by trusting what God did in Jesus’ death and resurrection increasingly grew more difficult as the first century ended. 1 Peter 2:11, 12 spoke to Christians who endured opposition. They found it difficult to be godly people because evil thinking and actions opposed their efforts in numerous ways. They received these admonitions:

1. See yourselves as aliens and strangers in this physical world. The values and principles that direct your lives are not the values and principles of evil people. It is true that you do not belong to physical existence. Physical existence never will be a friendly force to those who belong to Jesus Christ. If you “see” yourselves as belonging to physical existence, this is horrible for you!

2. Know there is an internal war being waged within you. Satan attacks your choice to belong to God. He appeals to your physical desires in ways that limit God’s influence in you. Compare this statement to Paul’s earlier statements in Galatians 5:16-24 and Ephesians 6:10-18.

3. Satan is serious and determined in his desire to destroy you spiritually!

4. Be a consistent example of godliness among people who misunderstand who God is and what God values. They may cause you all types of difficulty, but represent God well to them.

- a. They will misunderstand who you are by considering your godly values to be a morally undesirable weakness—do not expect them to understand or respect the “whys” of what you do.

- b. Just know they cannot deny the good effect of what you do in your forgiveness, grace, and mercy. The good results of your values and principles in Christ cannot be denied!

c. The eventual effect of the example of your consistent lifestyle will cause them to honor the God you serve—the God who at first they despised.

d. Your consistent actions will result in the salvation of those who refused to listen to your messages.

Never forget that serving God includes the way Christians look at physical life, physical existence, and divine purpose. Never forget that consistent godly examples reach godless people who reject godly messages. If Christians are small lamps for God, God's church should be a beacon of light for people lost in the darkness.

For Thought and Discussion

1. Contrast the spiritual world and the physical world.
2. State and discuss the "issue question."
3. Describe a first-century lamp. How did Jesus illustrate the value of Christian example?
4. Discuss the "essential function" of Christians being a godly example.
5. Enumerate the admonitions of 1 Peter 2:11, 12.
6. What two things should Christians never forget?

Lesson Nine

The Power of Example

Text: 1 Peter 3:13-17

To receive the full impact of Peter's words in our text, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of late first-century (and later) conditions. Christianity was declared to be an illegal religion in the Roman Empire. In the places that took this edict seriously, it was physically dangerous to be known as a Christian or to associate with those who were Christians. A person could be killed or placed in prison for recognizing Jesus as Lord. Some were ostracized from the community, and some lost their jobs and were banned from pursuing their work. The end result was extreme physical hardship.

In our society, the worst a Christian might anticipate is inconvenience. When today's consequences of faith in Jesus are compared to their consequences for believing in the resurrected Jesus, there is little comparison. How are Christians to react to physical hardship and danger caused by their faith in Jesus? How are hardship and danger to be factored into faith in Jesus as Lord?

In a desire to bring people to Christ, Christians today tend to "downplay" any difficulty to be found in declaring Jesus to be Lord of our lives. Today, Christians seem to "downplay" any difficulty in being a Christian. The result: converts often are caught unaware by difficult physical choices. Too often hardship in following Christ becomes in itself a faith crisis.

Question: Does hardship or difficulty in Jesus Christ become in itself an opportunity for Christian leadership?

Opportunity # 1: People out of Jesus Christ often define what is good differently than those in Christ. The non-Christian definition of good and evil may not be the Christian definition of good and evil. Hardship often provides the Christian an opportunity to get the non-Christian to re-examine his (her) definition of good and evil. Yes, there have been those who harmed Christians for doing good (by Christian definition). This occurred when the person who harmed disagreed with a Christian on what was good.

Opportunity # 2: The Christian sanctified in his (her) heart Christ as Lord. The word "sanctify" basically means to "set apart." The Christian had one Lord—and only one—in his (her) life. Jesus Christ alone occupied that role in a Christian's life then! People then were accustomed to having many Lords! To them, having one Lord was strange—especially if that only one was Jesus! Just as having Jesus alone as our supreme authority is strange to many today! If, then, there was a conflict, there was no question as to who directed the Christian's life no matter what the harm or the danger.

Opportunity # 3: The chance to explain “why” was to be seen as an opportunity. It was opportunity for the Christian to give wanted input.

Try to place this occurrence in the context of their circumstances. Use words and concepts we understand. This writing said the official persecutors asked, “How do you suffer as you do? We are accustomed to being cursed, being threatened, or seeing people die in fear as they lost their lives. However, you people do not do that. Your attitude is different! You do not curse or threaten. You do not fear death. You endure in your conviction that faith in Jesus is worthy of suffering. You face the loss of life as a benefit. How do you do that?”

The opportunity to explain arose from the attitudes that controlled Christians as they confronted hardship and danger. Christians were not like people who were not Christians as they suffered. Notice two things: (1) they were ready to explain their attitude as they suffered. (2) They explained respectfully. Their answer was not based on a sense of “getting even” or the threat of “You will pay for this”—they were gentle and reverent.

Opportunity #4: Their explanation was in keeping with a good conscience. Even when they endured injustice and pain, they behaved like Christians. As Jesus could pray for those responsible for his death as he died, they could look upon those who caused their anguish with sympathy and compassion. Their persecutors might slander them before the suffering and pain, but they could not deny that their faith made them unusual people after they endured suffering and pain. The injustice might begin with slander, but it would not end with slander—because of who they were in Jesus Christ. Unjust hardship proved the genuineness of Jesus Christ!

Often Christians of today think only in terms of benefits leading people to Jesus. We commonly think of leadership occurring only when good is done or good results from a situation. However, some of the most powerful leading in righteousness occurs when hardship or pain is involved. Suffering often demonstrates genuineness. Hardship often demonstrates the power of endurance. Though we often prefer to lead because blessings and benefits occur, we urgently need to remember that leading is powerful among Christians when they endure injustice.

May you reveal who you are in Christ through the good that occurs in your life, and through the hardship and injustice that occur in your life. May the good you encounter declare God’s goodness, and may the pain you encounter declare God’s goodness. Never forget that God often produces good from injustice long after the injustice has happened.

For Thought and Discussion

1. What were the conditions Christians faced when 1 Peter 3:13-17 was written?
2. What critical question did many early Christians have to answer?
3. Why do many Christians of today “downplay” any difficulty in being a Christian?
4. What was opportunity # 1 presented by the existence of hardship?

5. What was opportunity # 2 that hardship presented?
6. What was opportunity # 3? Discuss the probable reaction of official persecutors.
7. How did opportunity # 3 arise? You were asked to notice what two things?
8. Discuss opportunity # 4.
9. Often today's Christian thinks only in terms of what providing leadership opportunities?
10. Discuss how pain or injustice can provide powerful leading opportunities.
11. What should declare God's goodness in a Christian's life?

Lesson Ten

The Power of Service

Texts: John 13:1-20; Luke 22:24-30

Both these incidents are occurrences happening the last night of Jesus' earthly life. The John 13 incident seems to have occurred before Judas left and before Peter made his rash affirmation of loyalty to Jesus. This incident occurred prior to the group leaving the upper room.

The Luke 22 incident seemingly occurred after the Lord's Supper, after Judas left the group, but before Jesus and the group arrived at Gethsemane. It seems this was part of the discussion Jesus had with his disciples as they were in route from the upper room to the Mount of Olives.

The precise timing of when the incidents occurred is difficult to determine. You are asked to note these things happened at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. As best you can, try to put yourself in Jesus' situation at this time. Do so to get the full, discouraging impact the incidents had on Jesus at a truly critical, vulnerable moment.

Jesus is close to his death, and he knows it (John 13:1). He, with all his being, must focus on what he is about to endure (consider John 17 and Luke 22:39-46). On virtually a daily basis, he has spent his ministry with these men (by counting—as best they can—the Passovers, many assume this was three years). He taught them, gave them a direct example, and allowed them to observe his life on a continuing basis. Yet, they still do not grasp a fundamental truth he declared. Discourses are over. Examples are near the end. Continuing contact through association soon will be history. Time for a “do over” does not exist. Yet, little has changed! How discouraging it must have been for Jesus to have invested so much and the disciples to show so little understanding! He will provide them two powerful examples even yet. However, not until later will they grasp what he did.

In the first incident, he washed their feet. From their perspective, this was embarrassingly inappropriate! When he took his robe off and wrapped a towel around himself, he looked like a slave. The potential king should not look like a slave! Then he proceeded to do what only the least important of slaves were expected to do. Washing feet was a dirty job (people had no socks and wore sandals). For a Jew, it was also a religiously dangerous task. What if, in the process of walking, the dirty foot came into contact with something religiously unclean? One could easily be religiously defiled unknowingly by coming into contact with something religiously unclean.

Sure, before Lazarus' resurrection, the disciples thought Jesus' ministry was at its end (read John 11:1-16). However, had Jesus not spent a week speaking openly in the temple area confounding those who wanted to destroy him? Was he not extremely popular with the people? Jerusalem was his! Surely, nothing would prevent Jesus from being the Jewish King they imagined! It was not appropriate for a king to look like a slave or do a slave's work! How embarrassing—he who would become king was washing feet! The disciples should be washing his feet!

In the second incident—on that same last night—the disciples argued among themselves which of them was the greatest. The author of Luke called it a dispute (NASV, RSV, NIV, JB,). The KJV called it a strife. TEV called it an argument. NEB called it a jealous dispute. This was a serious confrontation! Jesus is on his way to be betrayed, and the disciples are arguing about what person will occupy the most important place in Jesus' administration! Seemingly, this is after the incident of Jesus washing their feet! It surely seems they were as thick headed as we are. They did not “get it,” and nothing Jesus said or did “got through” to them. They were so focused on themselves and their personal desires that they could not see or hear!

The primary point in both occurrences was the same: God places great spiritual significance on an individual follower's willingness to serve others. Look again at John 13:12-16 and Luke 22:25-27. Consider Jesus' lesson. Spiritual significance is not determined by what you did or the position you occupy, but your willingness to serve others. People who do not know God honor position. They want to be served. You know who I (Jesus) am, but I serve instead of seek for position. Are you more important than I am? If I serve, should you be focused on personal position? The evidence of greatness in God's sight is service to others, not position occupied! God is not impressed with positions!

Seeking spiritual position belongs to evil, not to godliness. Such motivation declares a person's ambition to seek to be served. The roots of evil run deep in that person's attitude of selfishness. (We are not speaking of a willingness to serve, but the desire to be served. To aspire to serve is a good thing. To aspire to be served is an ungodly thing.)

May none of us ever lead people into a selfishness that measures spiritual significance by the “religious position” one occupies or aspires to occupy. May each of us lead as examples of the meaning and dedication of serving others. The spirit of what it means to follow Jesus Christ is both captured and perpetuated by the willingness to serve. Nothing eliminates the “big I” and “little you” in a congregation as quickly as will an honest understanding of Jesus' focus on the importance of serving others for God.

For Thought and Discussion

1. The John 13 incident seeming occurred when?
2. The Luke 22 seemingly occurred when?
3. What are you asked to note?

4. What did Jesus need to focus on? Discuss Jesus' relation with these disciples throughout his ministry.
5. The disciples thought Jesus' washing feet was embarrassing and inappropriate. Why?
6. What did the disciples think *prior* to Lazarus' resurrection?
7. What did the disciples think the last week of Jesus' life? Why?
8. In the Luke 22 incident, what did the disciples do? Why did they not "get it"?
9. The primary point in both incidents is what?
10. God does not determine spiritual significance how?
11. God is impressed with what, but not with what?
12. Seeking spiritual positions belongs to what, not what?

Lesson Eleven

What God Wants In His Kingdom

Text: Hebrews 10:19-25

The religious transition from Judaism or idolatry to Christianity was enormous! Religion—whether Judaism or most forms of idolatry—involved a geographic place, a geographic center, a temple, prosperity, people who served as mediators (priests and high priests), sacrifices that involved a visible altar, and security for the religious devotees at the center. In Christianity there was no geographical place, no geographical center, no temple building (or sacred building of any sort), members were also the priests (1 Peter 2:9), with the resurrected Jesus as the only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), no visible altar, the sacrifices of praise and thankfulness (Hebrews 13:15), and no security for those devoted to the resurrected Jesus anywhere (from the last half of the first century). Those who became Christians not only made a major change in accepted theological views, but they also changed their understanding of what was religious. Christianity was open to all—regardless of heritage, regardless of background, regardless of political views or experiences, regardless of whether converts were poor and rich, and regardless if a person was a man or woman. Everyone was of equal worth to God.

Hebrews, because of its numerous illustrations from Judaism and use of Jewish concepts/practices, is considered to be directed to Jewish Christians. These Christians made numerous sacrifices for faith in Jesus Christ (consider Hebrews 10:32-39). The problem: Jewish Christians were given an ultimatum to forfeit all ties with the Jewish community if they remained Christians (that resulted in consequences beyond renouncing American citizenship).

To re-enter and maintain bonds with the Jewish community, they did not have to abandon God. The Jews and the Christians accepted and worshipped the same God. The point of contention was this: was Jesus the Christ that God promised? The Jewish community said, “NO!” The Christianity community said, “YES!”

To those Jewish Christians, the solution seemed simple. Denounce Jesus Christ, and their troubles ended. The writer of Hebrews said, “That is not possible without rejecting God. Jesus was God’s purpose from the beginning of sin! God’s intent was to bring Jesus Christ through Israel to produce a Savior for all people—not just for the Jewish people.”

Look carefully at Hebrews 10:19-21. In previous chapters in Hebrews the writer already affirmed (1) that Jesus came from God, (2) that Jesus was unique and superior to anything God did before Jesus came, and (3) that faith in Jesus as God’s unique high priest provided people direct access to God.

In Judaism, both the tabernacle and the temple were divided into a place where the priests served, and a place containing the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat. These two places were separated by a curtain. Only the Jewish high priest was allowed to enter the place containing the mercy seat. One day a year at the prescribed time he cared for the prescribed rituals that made atonement for him, the tabernacle, and the nation of Israel (the rituals of the Jewish Day of Atonement are found in Leviticus 16).

The author of Hebrews declared Jesus' flesh serves as the Christian's veil, Jesus' blood gave (gives) Christians access to the presence of God, and Jesus' resurrection provided (provides) Christians a "new and living way" to approach God. In Judaism the approach was made through the blood of dead animals. In Christianity the approach is made through the blood of the resurrected Jesus. Nothing happens without Jesus. He is the great high priest over all that belongs to God.

Then the writer says there are three things true of those who belong to God. (1) Because of what God did through Jesus, they approach God. They are not filled with terror to be in God's presence. Because of Jesus' purification they approach God with confidence and full assurance. They are a people who serve God with sincere hearts. Because of Jesus and Jesus' worthiness, they are not terrorized by God's presence. They do not approach God on the basis of their feeble goodness, but on the basis of Jesus' worthiness.

(2) They cling tenaciously to their confession that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus' position and role as God's Christ is the foundation of their hope. They place their complete hope in Jesus. He gives them access to God. He destroys their need to be in terror of God. Why do Christians have such confidence in Jesus? He does not lie! He keeps his promises! He is worthy of the Christian's implicit trust!

(3) Christians exhibit their absolute trust in Jesus by being encouragers! They are people who understand how to "stimulate" other people to do good, not evil (many know how to "stimulate" others to do evil). Even in harsh times, they understand how to challenge others to express good in good's most challenging expressions—to love and do good deeds. To love and do good deeds by whose definition? By God's definition! There is no greater challenge than to love and do good deeds in harsh circumstances when evil is on the attack!

What fundamentally does God want in those people who dare to be "church" to Him? (1) God wants a people who have such confidence in Jesus that they are not terrorized to be in His presence. (2) God wants a people who refuse to stop clinging to their confidence in Jesus. (3) God wants a people who know how to encourage others—and do!

Do you dare to be "church" to God? Will you be that kind of person?

For Thought and Discussion

1. Discuss the religious transition from Judaism or idolatry to Christianity (in the first century).
2. What was the problem in Hebrews?
3. What was the point of contention between the Jewish and Christian communities?
4. What seemed to be the simple solution? Why would that not work?
5. Prior to Hebrews 10:19-21, the author affirmed what three things about Jesus?

a.

b.

c.

6. What existed in both the tabernacle and temple? Who entered the mercy seat room, and when?

7. Discuss how Jesus is compared to the tabernacle.

8. What 3 things are true of those who are “church” to God?

a.

b.

c.

Lesson Twelve

The Need For Continued Growth

Text: Hebrews 5:11 - 6:8

We are familiar with growth problems. While quick and unusual development might be advantageous in some pursuits when we are young (like a physical development that provides an athletic advantage), no adult would wish for his (her) child's development to continue unrestricted after the child reaches and continues in adult existence. Were this the situation, that which was as advantage quickly becomes an unhealthy situation with far-reaching consequences.

The reverse is also true. If an infant or young child fails to advance in the range of "normal" development, the parents quickly become concerned. If there is a learning inability in school, the parents become deeply concerned. If at any young adult age the person has a distinct lack of any essential set of "living/managing skills," honest parents who recognize the situation are concerned and likely frustrated.

Most of us desire children who develop within "normal" ranges during all ages. Adults value accepted physical and mental development of those they love and care about. Most of us do not wish our children to struggle with the challenges of "being different."

Christians are a part of God's family! Because they place and demonstrate their confidence in Jesus Christ, they are provided the opportunity and right to be God's children who can cry "Abba Father" (Daddy) to God Himself. God wants in His children's spiritual development. The absence of that growth and development produces horrible spiritual consequences!

In today's text, the writer of Hebrews wished to use Melchizedek to illustrate additional points about spiritual development. Yet, though the illustrations existed and were understood by the writer, he could not use them. Why? Were the illustrations incorrect? No! Did the writer lack the necessary writing skills to use the illustrations? No! The problem: The original recipients of the writing lacked the ability to understand the illustrations. His illustrations would require an explanation because they were "dull of hearing."

The writer explained the situation this way: The recipients had failed to develop spiritually as they should have. They had been Christians long enough to be teachers, but they have spiritually regressed to the point that they needed to be taught the basics of Christianity again. They were spiritual infants who needed spiritual milk and were incapable of eating solid spiritual food that should nourish the spiritually mature. They were spiritual babies, not spiritual adults.

The objective of transformation from a sinful life to a righteous life involves "pressing on" to spiritual maturity. It involves growing beyond laying the spiritual foundation again. What did the writer regard to be spiritual foundation matters? (1) Understanding the basic things about the role that exists between God and Jesus Christ. (2) Repentance. (3) Expressing faith in God. (4) Instructions concerning washings (spiritual purity). (5) The laying on of hands. (6) The resurrection of the dead. (7) The eternal judgment.

This is striking: The subjects the writer of Hebrews considered evidence of spiritual immaturity would be regarded by many Christians of today as evidence of great spiritual maturity. Consider a question: If those were the subjects of spiritual infancy, what would be the subjects of spiritual maturity? For example, from what the writer said in the book of Hebrews, the order of spiritual roles would be God, Jesus Christ, and those who belonged to God through Jesus Christ. Compare the writer's order to the statements of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:21-23, 11:3, and 15:24-28. Do we use concepts of the trinity to evade the differing roles of God and Jesus Christ? Example two: Do you realize there are spiritual considerations that go beyond faith, repentance, and baptism? Do you understand there are spiritual matters that go beyond transformation, justice, sanctification, propitiation, and redemption? Example three: Is our concept of faithfulness tied to forcing people to confine themselves to the basics?

The writer did not say the basics were unimportant. He said the basics were subjects of the immature. The objective of the spiritually immature is to grow beyond the basics. The writer said that was the goal of the spiritual—" . . . This we shall do, if God permits." Or, when opportunity presents itself, we readily will respond to it!

Then the writer talked of the horror of falling away from Jesus Christ. To experience the blessings of God in Jesus Christ, and then to revert to the old life is to be guilty of crucifying and putting to shame God's son! It would be like the burning of a field to rid the field of unwanted vegetation (a common practice of farmers then and of primitive agriculture even today).

Note: the problem was NOT God's willingness to forgive, but these people's inability to repent (verse 6). They had no desire to return to God, no desire to pursue righteousness. They had neither appreciation nor respect for Jesus Christ.

The issue: If you plan to use your life to encourage faith and dependence on Jesus Christ, do you continue to grow spiritually? Can you understand and discuss spiritual matters that go beyond the foundation, beyond the basics? That absolutely is a matter of leading!

For Thought and Discussion

1. Illustrate when and how quick and unusual physical development might be desired.
2. Illustrate how continued development might be undesirable in the physical life of an adult.
3. Discuss the Christian's relationship with God.
4. How did the writer of Hebrews use Melchizedek to illustrate the consequences of failure in spiritually development?
5. What was the problem in the original recipients of the writing called Hebrews?
6. How did the writer of Hebrews explain the situation?
7. What 7 things did the writer list as foundation matters?
 - a.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

8. When we consider the 7 things the writer listed, what is striking?

9. Discuss the horror of deciding to leave Jesus Christ.

10. The problem was NOT what, but was what?

11. For us (today's Christian), what is the issue?

Lesson Thirteen

Our Privilege

Text: Hebrews 12:18-29

The people “one is working with” basically determine what can happen in any situation. For example, a quality teacher with quality skills and quality information may do wonders in one congregation and absolutely nothing in another. Why? A congregation that is highly motivated and desires guidance responds readily to good teaching and good information that is presented well. However, a congregation that has little background, deep contentment with “the way things always have been,” who has neither goals nor desires, and does not wish to be guided anywhere will actually resist good teaching and good information that is well presented. The problem does not lie in the teacher, the presentation, or the material, but in those who are recipients of the material. One congregation of people wishes to understand and grow; one does not.

We commonly make an assumption regarding Israel that betrays us when we reach conclusions about God’s work. We assume that the Old Testament people known as Israel were very moral, highly motivated people with a deep knowledge of and appreciation for God. We look at them as being basically spiritual.

A simplified version of God’s effort/plan to deliver people from the spiritual slavery of sin and its consequences was this: work through a man who had a deep trust of God to produce a nation. (The man was Abraham and the nation was Israel.) Work through that nation to produce a Savior for all people. (Again, the nation was Israel, and the Savior was Jesus.) Through this Savior provide all people with access to God through what God did through Jesus. By this access, provide all who would enter Christ hope as a result of forgiveness.

While God had much to work with in Abraham, He had little to work with in the Old Testament people known as Israel. They spent generations as slaves in Egypt with the primary spiritual influence of many forms of idolatry. Consider the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-17. Verses 2-11 involve four basic commands that discuss their relationship with God. Verses 12-17 involve six basic commands that discuss their relationship with each other. Why? They did not know how to correctly relate to the holy God, and they did not know how to correctly relate to each other. These commands were given because of their *ignorance*, not because of their *agreement*.

These commandments did NOT represent the way they had been behaving, but how they should behave. Evidence? God performed ten incredible miracles to secure their release from

Egypt, and the people were relieved and glad—until they saw the Egyptian army chasing them. When the Egyptian army came near, they immediately forgot about God’s deliverance. They reacted as fearful slaves instead of freed people. Read Exodus 14:10-12. The people cried. They asked Moses if there were no graves in Egypt. Their predicament was Moses’ fault! We (Israel) told you (Moses) all along to leave us alone—see Exodus 5:15-21.

They crossed the Red Sea, and they were jubilant—God was the greatest! (See Exodus 15:1-18.) Then came their travel in the wilderness of Sin, and they said they wished God had killed them in Egypt where they had plenty to eat. God provided them with quail and manna. Then they came to Rephidim where they had no water, and they said they would die of thirst. God provided them with water. Finally they were posed to enter Canaan (Numbers 13, 14). They wept, grumbled, and said life in Egypt was better than what was ahead.

Never did the generation that left Egypt as adults trust the God that delivered them. Throughout their Old Testament history, there were far more occasions of national distrust than trust. Truly, God had little to work with—and they were the better of the nations that existed! Read Deuteronomy 7:6-11, 8:15-20, or 9:4-6 lately?)

In our text today, Hebrews 12:18-29, the Jewish Mount Sinai is compared to the Christian Mount Zion. The fear of control is compared to the power of encouragement. Is it because God changed? No! At first the same God worked with an “out of control” people. He used the fear (terror) of the untouchable, fire, darkness, gloom, tornado, and an endless trumpet blast in an attempt to control them. Israel was so filled with dread and trembling that all they saw was that closeness to God brought the horrible. The Christian comes to encouraging conquerors, to a God who has blessed, and to a wonderful mediator. They are a people who come in faith, not dread.

Has mankind tamed God and made God gentle and harmless? No! It is the contrast between being a people who needed to be controlled and being a people who want to be righteous. It is the contrast between being afraid to sin and not wanting to sin. It is the contrast of being good because of immediate physical necessity and a desire to be righteous now and eternally. It is the contrast between those who value physical well being and those who value eternal well being.

Never underestimate the horror of the consequences of defying God, but never underestimate what God did for people in Jesus! Only because of Jesus do we dare approach God!

For Thought and Discussion

1. Explain how the people “one works with” can determine the outcome of a situation.
2. What assumption do we often make about Old Testament Israel that betrays us?
3. Give a simplified version of God’s effort/plan to deliver people from sin.

4. Contrast God's work with Abraham (the person) and God's work with Israel (the nation).
5. What did the first 4 of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:2-11 discuss?
6. What did the last 6 of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:12-17 discuss?
7. Why were those two discussions in the Exodus 20 Ten Commandments?
8. Illustrate early Israel's failure to trust God with the Egyptian army, the Red Sea, and the wilderness of Sin.
9. What does Deuteronomy 7:6-11, 8:15-20 and 9:4-6 say about Israel?
10. In Hebrews 12:18-29, discuss the contrast between Mount Sinai and Mount Zion.