

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

God Speaks Through Circumstances

***By
Dr. James E. Potts***

Lesson 14

“Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

Experience Alone is Unreliable

Your experience alone cannot be your guide. Every experience must be held up against the Scriptures. Throughout your life, there will be times when you want to respond based on your experiences or your wisdom. But you can't see all that God sees in our situation. We don't know long-term results of our present circumstances. We don't know how God intends to use good or difficult life events to build our character, to influence other people, or to further His kingdom. Trying to discover God's will based on our understanding of circumstances alone can be misleading. Always rely on the Holy Spirit to reveal the truth of your situation through God's Word.

Also, see how God works by looking through the entire Bible. Don't rely on one or two isolated passages. When you learn how God has worked historically, you'll better recognize Him at work in your life. Your experience is valid only when it is confirmed in the Scriptures.

The Bible Is Our Guide

The Word of God is the infallible guide to what we should be doing (2 Tim. 3:16). Some people want to move beyond the Bible and rely on the world's way's, on personal experience, or on popular thinking. As Christian disciples, we cannot abandon the guidance we find in Scripture. The Bible is our guide for faith and practice, and it is remarkably practical.

Jesus Watched the Father's Activity

Jesus knew the Father's will for His life daily by watching the Father's activity. He describes the process in:

John 5:17, 19-20

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

Jesus did not take the initiative in what He did for the Father. Only the Father is the initiator. The Father had been working throughout history and was carrying out His purposes in Jesus' time on earth. The Father let the Son know what He was doing. When Jesus saw the Father's activity that was Jesus' invitation to join His Father.

Jesus did not ever have to guess what He should do. Nor did He have to dream up what He could do for the Father. Instead, He simply watched to see what the Father was doing around Him, and He immediately aligned His life that way. Then the Father accomplished His purposes through Jesus.

This is how Jesus wants us to respond to His lordship in our lives. He reveals what He is doing, and then we adjust our lives, our plans, and our goals to Him. We are to place our lives at His disposal—where He is working—so He can accomplish His purposes through us.

Sometimes circumstances appear to be “bad.” Maybe you're in the middle of a difficult situation and you're asking God, “Why is this happening to me?” If so, you're not alone.

God's Perspective Is Vital

Joseph needed God's perspective to understand his circumstances. He had visions of greatness when he was a youth (Gen. 37:1-11). Yet his older brothers maliciously turned against him and sold him as a slave. Joseph was taken to a foreign country where it appeared he would spend the rest of his life in bondage, never to see his family again. Then things got worse.

He was falsely accused of terrible crime and thrown in jail. Later, when a fellow prisoner Joseph had helped was released, he hoped the man might help him in return. Instead, the man forgot about Joseph. For someone who had committed no offense, Joseph's life appeared to be undeservedly harsh and unfair.

Then the pharaoh had a dream, and all of Joseph's life experiences began to fall into place (Gen. 41:1-8). His fellow prisoner remembered and mentioned Joseph to Pharaoh. Joseph interpreted the pharaoh's dream, which was a warning from God of impending disaster. Joseph was appointed the second in command in all of Egypt, and ultimately, he saved his father, brothers, and their families from a devastating famine. Reviewing all God had allowed in his life, Joseph declared to his brother, ***“You meant evil against me but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).*** When Joseph's life was placed in the context of God's eternal purposes, every major experience in his life—both good and bad—could be seen to have a purpose and to result in good.

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

When you face difficult or confusing circumstances, they can overwhelm you. If you bury yourself in the circumstances, you will always have a distorted understanding of God. For example, you might say, “God doesn’t love me” or “God is not fair,” but both of those statements are false. Have you ever been in the middle of a tragic or fearful situation where, in your prayers, you began to accuse God of some things that you know are not true?

Perhaps you began to question God’s love or His wisdom. Maybe you were afraid to say that He was wrong, but you sort of said, “God, you deceived me in letting me believe that this was the right thing to do. Why didn’t you stop me?” A whole lot of wrong conclusions can result if you try to look at God from the middle of a painful situation.

What should you do instead? First, ask God to show you His perspective on what’s happening. Look back at your situation from what you already know about God. When you face a troublesome time, the Holy Spirit will take the Word of God and help you understand the event from God’s perspective. He will reveal to you the truth of your circumstances. Then you can adjust your life and thinking to what God is doing.

When circumstances seem to be overwhelming, this is how you are to respond:

- Settle in your mind that God forever demonstrated His absolute love for you on the cross. His love will never change.
- Do not try to understand what God is like from the middle of your circumstances.
- Go to God, and ask Him to help you see His perspective on your situation.
- Wait on the Holy Spirit. He will take the Word of God and help you understand your circumstances.
- Adjust your life to God and what you see Him doing in your situation.
- Do all He tells you to do.
- Experience God working in and through you to accomplish His purposes.

God is sovereign. You may face a situation like Joseph’s in which God does not tell you what He is doing, at first. If so, acknowledge His love and sovereignty, and depend on His sustaining grace to see you through the situation. There are some things that happen in our lives we may never understand until they are revealed in heaven. Then we will celebrate with people like Joseph and Job that God was indeed faithful

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

and loving, even when we didn't understand all He was doing or allowing in our lives.

Truth And Your Circumstances

You can't understand the truth of your circumstances until you have heard from God. Exodus 5-6 records that Moses did what God told him to do and asked Pharaoh to release the Israelites. Pharaoh refused, instead, increasing the Israelites' hardship. The Israelites turned against Moses and criticized him for causing so much trouble. What would you have done if you had been in Moses' place?

The human tendency would be to assume you'd missed God's will. You might get mad at Israel for treating your good intentions so ungratefully, or you might become angry at God for asking you to do something that only magnified your problems. Moses blamed God and accused Him of failing to do what He promised, and I suppose most of us would have responded the same way. Moses said,

Exodus 5:22-23

Moses was discouraged and ready to quit (Exod. 6:12). I'm glad God is patient with us! He took time to explain His perspective to Moses. God wanted Pharaoh to resist so the people could witness God's mighty hand of deliverance. He wanted His people to come to know Him by experience as the great "***I AM.***" God was allowing His people's problem to increase so they could witness a greater measure of God's power when He delivered them!

We learn from Moses' example that when you face confusing circumstances, don't start blaming God. Don't quit following Him. Ask Him to reveal the truth of your circumstances, and to show you His perspective. Then wait on the Lord (Ps. 25:3-5). You need to have your life firmly anchored in God. The most difficult thing you will ever have to do is deny self, embrace the will of God, and follow Him (Matt. 16:24).

The hardest part of your relationship to God is remaining God-centered. If you were to record a whole day in your life, you might find that your prayers, your attitudes, your thoughts—everything about that day—was some what self-centered. You may not be seeing things from God's perspective. You may try to explain to God what your perspective is, but the key is God's will. As your Father, He has every right to be:

- The Initiator in your life;

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

- The Focus of your life;
- The Director of your life.

That is what it means for Him to be Lord.

HEARING FROM TRUTH

When the Holy Spirit talks to you, He will reveal truth to you. He is going to talk to you about a Person, Jesus Christ. Yes, truth is a Person! Jesus said, ***“I am—the truth” (John 14:6).***

Truth in a Storm

The disciples were in a boat when a terrifying storm struck (Mark 4:35-41), but Jesus was sleeping in the back of the boat. If you had asked those disciples in the midst of the storm, “What is the truth of this situation?” They would have said, “We perish!” But was that the truth? No. Truth was sleeping at the back of the boat. In a moment, the Truth Himself would stand up and calm the storm. Once that happened, they knew the truth of their circumstances. The Person of Truth is always present in your life. You cannot know the truth of your circumstances until you have heard from God.

Truth at a Funeral

Notice the difference truth made in this circumstance: Jesus went into a town called Nain. His disciples and a large crowd were traveling with Him. Just as He neared the gate of the town, a dead man was being carried out. He was His mother’s only son, and she was a widow. A large crowd from the city was also with her. When the Lord saw her, He had compassion on her and said, ***“Don’t cry.”*** Then He came up and touched the open coffin, and the pallbearers stopped.

And He said, ***“Young man, I tell you, get up!”*** The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him to his mother. Then fear came over everyone, and they glorified God, saying, ***“A great prophet has risen among us,”*** and ***“God has visited His people,”*** This report about Him went throughout Judea and all the vicinity. (Luke 7:11-17).

If you had asked the grieving mother, “What is the truth of this situation?” She might have replied, “My husband died several years ago. We had only one son, and I hoped that we would enjoy wonderful times together and that he would take care of me in my old age. Now my son is dead and I have no one to care for me.” But was that the truth? No. Truth was standing in front of her!

Wednesday, July 5, 2023 Bible study notes.

When He reached out and touched her son, everything changed. When Jesus demonstrated His power, the people were amazed at what they had witnessed, and they proclaimed all over the countryside that a great prophet had come (Luke 7:16-17). Never determine the truth of a situation by looking at the circumstances. Don't evaluate your situation until you have heard from Jesus. He is the Truth of every circumstance.

Truth with Hungry People

Jesus was surrounded by more than five thousand hungry people (John 6:1-15), and He wanted to feed them. In a test of Philip's faith, Jesus asked where they could buy enough bread to feed the multitude. If you had asked the disciples at that moment about the truth of the situation, they would have told you, "We can't do it. Feeding this multitude is impossible." But was that true? No. We know the rest of the story. So, wouldn't we be better off if we trusted God with the other half of the story in our lives? Truth Himself fed five thousand men, plus their families, and had twelve baskets full of leftovers! God is saying, trust Me, obey Me, and it will happen!

Yes, Lord

In making a decision, the greatest difficulty may not be in choosing between good and bad but in choosing between good and best. You may have several options that all appear good. The place to start is to say with all of your heart: "*Lord, whatever I know to be Your will, I will do. Regardless of the cost and regardless of the adjustment, I commit myself to follow Your will. No matter what that looks like, Lord, I will do it!*"

You need to commit to that before you seek God's will. Otherwise, you do not mean "Thy will be done." Instead, you are saying, "Thy will be done as long as it does not conflict with my will." Two words in the believer's language cannot go together: "No, Lord." If you say "no," He is not your Lord. If He is your Lord, your answer must always be "yes." In decision making, do not proceed until you can honestly say, "Whatever you want of me, Lord, I will do it."

Questions For Reflection

- Are you in the midst of a confusing situation? How are you seeking God's perspective?
- Is God speaking to you through a circumstance in your life? What is He saying?

Wednesday July 12, 2023

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

God Speaks Through the Church

By Dr. James E. Potts

Presented by Rev. Kenneth Brown

Lesson 15

Ephesians 4:15-16

15) But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ:

16) From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

Paul was looking at the church on two levels in this section. He saw the Body of Christ, made up of all true believers, growing gradually until it reaches spiritual maturity. But he also saw the local body of believers ministering to each other, growing together, and thereby experiencing spiritual unity.

Evidence of maturity is truth joined with love: ***“speaking the truth in love” (4:15)***. It has been said that truth without love is brutality, but love without truth is hypocrisy. Little children do not know how to blend truth and love. They think that if you love someone, you must shield him from the truth if knowing the truth will hurt him. It is a mark of maturity when we are able to share the truth with fellow believers and do, it in love. ***“Faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Prov. 27:6)***.

Another evidence of maturity is cooperation (**v. 16**). We realize that, as members of the One Body, and a local body, we belong to each other, we affect each other, and we need each other. Each believer, no matter how insignificant he/she may appear, has a ministry to other believers. The Body grows as the individual members grow, and they grow as they feed on the Word and minister to each other. Notice once again the emphasis on love: ***“speaking the truth in love” (4:15)***. Love is the circulatory system of the Body.

It has been discovered that isolated, neglected babies do not grow properly and are especially susceptible to disease, while babies who are loved and handled grow normally and are stronger. So, it is with the children of God.

Wednesday July 12, 2023

A church is the body of Christ. It functions best when all of its members are able to share what they sense God is doing and saying. Members of a congregation can't fully know God's will for their lives separately from the testimony of other members. A church needs to hear the whole counsel of God through its members. Then it can proceed in confidence and unity to do God's will.

The Body of Christ

Many believers today feel that their walk with God is private and independent. They see no need for joining a church or making themselves accountable to other believers. Some view the church in terms of how it can help them accomplish the ministry God has given them personally, rather than seeking how their lives fit into the larger work the Lord is doing in the congregation.

The Bible teaches that our walk with God is personal, but it is not private. Sin makes people independent. Salvation makes us interdependent on one another. Scripture teaches that the church is a body in which each member is vitally important. While Christians have personal access to God through Christ as their one Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), God created the church as His redemptive agent in the world. He is at work accomplishing His purposes, and He places every member in a church to accomplish His purposes through each congregation.

Jesus Christ is present as Head of every local church (Eph. 4:15), and every member is placed in the body as it pleases God (1 Cor. 12:18). The Holy Spirit manifests Himself to every person for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), and the whole body is fitted together by the Father. Members are enabled and equipped by the Holy Spirit to function where the Father has placed them in the body. Then the body functions as Christ leads, until every member becomes spiritually mature (Eph. 4:13). Believers need each other. What one member lacks, others can supply.

What God is doing in and through the body is essential to our knowing how to respond to Him. Where we see Him working in the body, we make the necessary adjustments and put our life there too. In the church, we are to let God use us in any way He chooses to complete His work. This was Paul's goal when he said, "***We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ***" (Col. 1:28). Paul constantly urged believers to become vitally involved with his life and ministry. The effectiveness of Paul's ministry rested on them.

Apart from hearing from other members of the body, you can't know how you are to function in the church. Every member needs to listen to what other members say.

Wednesday July 12, 2023

If the members are not sharing what they sense God is doing, the whole body is in trouble. We depend on others in the church to help us understand God's will. Likewise, we take seriously our role to help other believers in the same way. An isolated believer cannot minister to others, nor can others minister to them.

Depending On God to Speak Through the Church

It is important to note that a need does not constitute a call. Without proper guidance, many well-meaning believers see every need in their church as a divine call for them to respond. Don't ever be afraid to let the body of believers assist you in knowing God's will.

Sometimes God may speak through one person. Keep in mind, however, that one individual is not the church. Usually, you need to take all the counsel of people for clear direction. What you will find is that a number of things begin to line up. What you are hearing from the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church will all point to the same thing. Then you can proceed with confidence.

You may say to me, you don't know my church. I can't depend on them to help me know God's will." Be careful. When you say that, you have said more about your opinion of God than about your church. You are saying, "Not even God can work through these people." But I don't think you really believe that. You place yourself in danger when you isolate yourself from the counsel of God's people. Trust God to give direction through other believers.

Turn to them for advice on major decisions. Listen to anything the church has to say to you. Then let God confirm what His message is for you. Often, relating what God is doing in your life may help someone else encounter God in a meaningful way.

Summary

God speaks to His people by the Holy Spirit. He can speak in any way He chooses, but the most common ways through which God speaks today include the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church. He speaks to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways. When what God says through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church line up to say the same thing, you can move forward with confidence to follow God's directions.

Each believer is interdependent with all the others to function correctly in that body. You cannot fully know God's will for your involvement in the body of Christ apart from the counsel God provides through other members. All members of the body belong to each other. You can and should depend on God to speak through other be

Wednesday July 12, 2023

lievers and the church to help you know what assignment you are to carry out in the ministry of the kingdom.

Pray for your church and the way God works in and through its members to help believers understand God's call. Reflect on times and ways God has spoken to you through other believers, and thank God for using them to speak to you. Sometime soon, get together with two or three other believers from your church to pray for each other and your church.

Truth unites, but lies divide. Love unites, but selfishness divides. Therefore, "*speaking the truth in love,*" let us equip one another and edify one another, that all of us may grow up to be more like Christ.

Questions for Reflection

- Are you interconnected in a church body so God can speak to you through other church members?
- If so, what is something God has said to you through fellow believers?
- How do you respond when you become aware of a need in your church that you might meet?
- How do you know if you are the person God wants to use to meet that need?
- How is God presently using you to minister to other members of your church today?
- Are you actively seeking His will in this regard?

07/12/23

Wednesday July 19, 2023

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

God's Invitation Leads to A Crisis of Belief

***By
Dr. James E. Potts***

Lesson 16

“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” (Hebrews 11:6).

This lesson focuses on a turning point necessary in your following God's will. When God invites you to join Him in His work, He presents a God-sized assignment He wants to accomplish. It will be obvious you can't do it on your own. If God doesn't help, you will fail. This is the turning point at which many people decide not to follow what they sense God is leading them to do. Then they wonder why they do not experience God's presence, power, and activity the way some believers do.

The word crisis comes from a Greek word that means “decision.” The same word is often translated “judgment.” We are not talking about a tragedy in your life such as an accident or death. This crisis is not a disaster or bad thing. It's turning point or fork in the road that calls for a decision. You must decide what you believe about God. How you respond when you reach this turning point will determine whether or not you proceed with God in something only, He can do or whether you continue on your own way and miss what God has purposed for your life. This is not a one-time experience. How you live your life daily is a testimony of what you believe about God.

The Crisis of Belief

These are the characteristics of every crisis of belief:

- An encounter with God requires faith.
- Encounters with God are God-sized.
- What you do in response to God's invitation reveals what you believe about God.
- True faith requires action.

Wednesday July 19, 2023

The Faith Requirement

All through Scripture when God revealed Himself, His purposes, and His ways, the response required faith. Faith is confidence that what God promised will come to pass. Sight is the opposite of faith. If you can see clearly how something can be accomplished, faith is more than likely not required.

Believers, as well as everyone else, have a tendency to try building a life in which faith is unnecessary. We establish a comfort zone where everything is in our control, but this is not pleasing to God. God will allow things into our lives that drive us to total dependence upon Him. Then we see His power and His glory.

Your faith does not rest on a concept or an idea. Faith must be centered on a Person—God Himself. Faith is only valid if it is focused on God and what He says He is purposing to do. Jesus said if His followers have faith in God, they will do even greater things than He has done. Our faith in the Lord must be based on God’s power, not on human wisdom. Without a firm faith in the Lord, we will stumble and fall.

In his power, **Moses** could never have delivered the Israelites from Pharaoh’s army, crossed the Red Sea on dry land, provided water from a rock, or furnished bread and meat to his people. Moses had to believe that God, who called him, would do the things He said He would do.

Joshua could not take the Israelites across the Jordan River on dry land, bring down city walls, and defeat heavily armed enemies. Only God could do those things. Joshua had to have faith in God. On their own, the **disciples** could not feed the multitudes, heal the sick, or raise the dead. But God could and did do these very things through them.

When God lets you know what He wants to do through you, it will be something only He can do. What you believe about Him will determine your response. If you have faith in the God who called you, you will obey, and He will bring to pass what He purposes to do. If you lack faith, you will not do what He wants, and that is disobedience.

Jesus questioned those around Him, **“Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and don’t do the things I say?” (Luke 6:46)**. Jesus frequently rebuked His disciples for their lack of faith. Their unbelief revealed that they really had not come to know who He was. Therefore, they did not know what He could do.

Wednesday July 19, 2023

Obedience Shows Faith

Faith was required of Moses and the disciples. When God calls a person to join Him in a God-sized task, faith is always necessary. Obedience indicates faith in God. Disobedience reveals a lack of faith. Without faith, a person cannot please God (Heb. 11:6). Without faith, a church cannot please God.

We face the same crisis of belief the people in the Bible experienced. When God speaks, what He asks of us requires faith. Our major hindrance to obedience is our self-centeredness. We think we have to accomplish the assignment in our own power and with our current resources. We think, “I can’t do that. That’s not possible.” In other words, we lack faith.

We forget that when God speaks, He always reveals what He is going to do—not what He wants us to do for Him. We join Him so He works through us. We are not called upon to accomplish the task by our ingenuity, ability, or limited resources. With faith, we can proceed confidently because we know He is going to bring to pass what He purposes. ***“Looking at them, Jesus said, ‘With men it is impossible, but not with God, because all things are possible with God’” (Mark 10:27).***

God-Sized Assignments

God wants the world to know Him. That way, people will come to understand what God is like when they see Him at work. They will know His nature when they see it expressed in His activity.

Some people believe God will never ask them to undertake anything that seems impossible. They believe God will never lead a church to attempt something they cannot afford, ask someone to do something outside their giftedness, or lead someone to do something they are afraid of doing. Yet if people are going to see God at work, they must witness more than just sincere believers doing the best they can. People must see God at work in believers’ lives.

The Early Church

Christians in the early church followed the directions of the Holy Spirit. What our world often sees are devoted, committed believers serving God to the best of their ability. But they don’t witness anything happening that can only be explained in terms of God’s activity. Why? Could it be we aren’t attempting anything that only God can do?

The world passes us by, not wanting to become involved because they are merely seeing people at work, not God. We have to work hard at it and let the world see God

Wednesday July 19, 2023

at work, and He will attract them. Let Christ be lifted up—not in words, but in life. Let them see the difference the living Christ makes in a life, a family, or a church, and this will affect how they respond. When the world see things happening through God’s people that cannot be explained except that God Himself had done them, then people will be drawn to God.

The world comes to know God when they see God’s nature expressed through His activity. When God starts to work, He accomplishes something only He can do, and both God’s people and the world come to experience Him in ways they have never known Him before. That is why God gives God-sized assignments to His people.

Actions Speak

When God invites you to join Him and you face a crisis of belief, what you do next reveals what you believe about God. When two blind men demonstrated that they believed Jesus was merciful and that He was the Messiah. Jesus healed them according to their faith (Matt. 9:27-31). A woman who had been hemorrhaging for years believed that just a touch of Jesus’ garment would allow His healing power to flow to her.

The disciples were caught in a storm at sea. Jesus rebuked them, not for their human tendency to fear but for their failure to recognize His presence, protection, and power (Matt. 8:23-27). Their actions revealed their unbelief rather than their faith. When the storms of life overtake us, we often respond as if God does not exist or does not care.

When a centurion went searching for Jesus’ help to heal his servant, he said, ***“Only say the word, and my servant will be healed”*** (Matt. 8:8). Jesus commended the centurion’s faith in His authority and power, and He healed the servant because of the faith of his master (Matt. 8:5-13).

In each of these biblical examples, what people did, indicated to Jesus their faith—or lack of it. What you do—not what you say you believe—reveals what you really believe about God. ***“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead”*** (James 2:26).

Summary

When God invites you to be involved in His activity, He wants to reveal Himself to you and to a watching world. Therefore, He will give you a God-sized assignment. When you are confronted with such a task, you’ll face a crisis of belief. You’ll have

Wednesday July 19, 2023

to decide what you really believe about the God who called you, and the way you respond to God will reveal what you believe, regardless of what you say. Following God requires faith and action. Without faith you cannot please God. And without action, your faith is dead (James 2:26).

Questions for Reflection

- ***Are you experiencing a crisis of belief? If so, what is God asking you to do? What is it that keeps you from obeying?***
- ***What does your present walk with God reveal about what you believe about Him?***
- ***What is the evidence of God at work in and through your life?***
- ***What in your life or the life of your church can only be explained by the presence of Almighty God?***
- ***Is there something in your life you struggle to turn over to God?***
- ***How is God presently seeking to increase your faith in Him?***

07/19/23

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

Joining God Requires Adjustments

***By
Dr. James E. Potts***

Lesson 17

“And He said to them all, if any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it but whosoever will lose his life for My sake, the same shall save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

Many of us want God to speak and lead us in His will. We want the excitement of God working through us, but we are not willing to make any major adjustments so, He will. The Bible reveals that every time God speaks to people about something He wants to do, they have to realign their lives in some way. When God’s people are willing to take the necessary actions, God accomplishes His purposes through those He calls.

A Second Critical Turning Point

As we discussed in the last lesson, the first turning point in knowing and doing the will of God is the crisis of belief—you must believe God is who He says He is and that He will do what He says, He will do. Without faith in God, you will make the wrong decision at this critical point.

The second critical turning point is adjusting your life to God. If you choose to make the necessary adjustments, you can go on to obedience. If you refuse, you could miss what God has in store for your life. Obedience begins in the heart as a willingness to do whatever God says. Obedience is expressed through action, by words and deeds. Our obedience can be costly—to you and to those around you.

You Can’t Stay Where You Are and Go with God

When God speaks, revealing what He is about to do, that revelation is your invitation to adjust your life to Him. As you adjust your heart and mind to Him, His purposes, and His ways, you are in a position to obey. You can’t continue business as usual or stay where you are and go with God at the same time. This truth is clearly seen in the Scriptures.

- Noah could not continue life as usual and build an ark at the same time (Gen. 6).
- Abram could not stay in Ur or Haran and father a nation in Canaan (Gen. 12:1-8).
- Moses could not stay on the back side of the desert herding sheep and stand before Pharaoh at the same time (Exod. 3).
- Rahab could not obey the king and save the lives of the Israelites spies (Josh. 2:1-24).
- Ruth could not remain with her relatives and join the people of God in Israel (Ruth 1:16-18).
- David had to leave his sheep to become king (1 Sam. 16:1-13).
- Amos had to leave his sycamore orchard to preach in Israel (Amos 7:14-15).
- Jonah had to leave his home and go against what he had been taught in order to preach in Nineveh (Jonah 1:1-2; 3:1-2; 4:1-11).
- Esther could not remain silent before the king and save her people (Esther 4:14).
- Peter, Andrew, James, and John had to leave their fishing businesses in order to follow Jesus (Matt. 4:18-22).
- Matthew had to leave his lucrative tax collecting job to follow Jesus (Matt. 9:9).
- Saul had to change direction completely in order for God to use him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-19).

Enormous changes and adjustments were required whenever God's people determined to obey His calling. Some had to leave family and country. Others had to abandon long held prejudices and reorient their thinking. Men and women were willing to leave behind life goals, ideals, and desires. Everything had to be yielded to God and their entire life adjusted to Him. The moment the necessary adjustments were made, God began to accomplish His purposes through them. Each one learned that adjusting one's life to God is always well worth the cost.

When you look to the Scriptures, you will see that God does require changes of His people. His own Son gave up more than anyone: ***“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: although He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).*** Jesus emptied Himself of position and glory in heaven to join the Father in providing salvation through His death on the cross. Jesus couldn't stay where He was in heaven and be a part of the Father's plan to redeem humanity on earth.

If you want to be a disciple of Jesus, you have no choice. You will have to make meaningful changes in your life. Following your Master means going where He goes. Until you are ready to make any change necessary to follow and obey what God has said, you will be of little use to God. Your greatest difficulty in following God may come at this point.

Our tendency is to want God to adjust to us and our plans. We want to obey God but only on our terms! His ways are different from ours, though God says, ***“For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa. 55:9).*** The only way to follow Him is to align our thinking and our actions with His ways. Before we can follow Jesus, we must be willing to make whatever adjustment is necessary. Understand now, the Lord knows what it is in each of our hearts that hinders us from fully giving ourselves over to following Him.

Doubt and fear of the future are behind the reluctance of many to wholeheartedly accept and follow God’s invitation to join Him. For many believers, the thought of moving from home and leaving extended family keeps them from following Christ. Adjusting our lives to God means dealing with financial, physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational barriers that prevent us from complete obedience to Him.

The Necessary Adjustments

What kind of adjustments does God require? Here are a few categories where adjustments may be required:

- Your circumstances (job, home, finances).
- Your relationships (family, friends).
- Your thinking (prejudices, methodology, planning).
- Your commitments (to family, church, job, plans, tradition).
- Your actions (how you pray, give, serve).
- Your beliefs (about God, His purposes, His ways, your relationship to Him).

A major adjustment will come at the point of acting on your faith. Your intellectual decision may be the easy part. The hard part is adjusting your life to God and acting in a manner that demonstrates your faith. You may be called upon to attempt things only God can do, whereas before you may have done only that which you knew you could accomplish.

Being able to identify an adjustment is not as important as making it. Once you understand what change God wants you to make, He will help you know how to do it. Your part is to obey.

Absolute Surrender

God frequently requires adjustments in areas you have never considered before. Just because you have never seen yourself as a preacher, Bible teacher, author or missionary doesn't mean God will never ask you to preach, teach or write or go where He sends. God is looking for absolute surrender. We must have a willing heart to do whatever He asks, and then trust Him to enable us to do it.

God does not delight in making us do things we don't like. But He does love us enough to involve us in His work, and He refuses to leave us where we are when He knows we could be experiencing much more of Him. Any adjustment God expects you to make is for your good and for the welfare of those He intends to bless through your life.

The adjustments required are in direct response to God's leadership. To truly follow and experience God, we must reorient our lives to Him. We change our viewpoints to align with His. We amend our ways to be like His. After we make the necessary changes, He tells us what to do next. Pleasing God is more important than satisfying people.

Some have questioned whether major adjustments are always necessary in order to follow God. Anytime you go from where you are to where God is working, or from your way of thinking to God's way of thinking, or from your ways to God's ways, or from your purposes to His purposes, a major adjustment will be involved. That's because God's ways and His plans are much better than our own best plans and thinking.

Absolute surrender involves giving up our desires, goals, and preferences to God and accepting God's will, regardless of how difficult it may be. Another adjustment we must make to do God's will is reaching a place of total dependence on God. Jesus said, ***"Without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5)***. As God's servants, we must be in that intimate relationship so He will complete His work through us. We must depend on God alone.

When we surrender our lives completely, we become totally dependent on Him. Then we understand that, apart from Him, we can do nothing. We must learn to live in constant awareness of our total reliance on God if He is to accomplish His pur-

poses through us. This adjustment requires a shift from doing work for God according to our abilities, gifts, goals, likes, and dislikes to being totally dependent on God, His working, and His resources. It requires courage and faith.

If God is not at work in you, you can do nothing to bear spiritual fruit. As you are crucified with Christ, He lives through you to accomplish that that He is doing by His grace. When God sets out to do something, He guarantees that it will come to pass. He is the One who will accomplish what He intends to do. If you depend on anything other than God, you are asking for failure.

Waiting On the Lord

Sometimes as you adjust your life to God, He requires that you wait on Him. Learning to wait on God is one of the hardest but most important aspects of the Christian life. God seeks a love relationship with you, and waiting develops you to totally depend on Him. It assures that you will act in His timing, not your own.

You may think of waiting as passive/inactive, but waiting on the Lord is anything but inactive. While you wait on Him, you will be praying with a passion to know Him, and His ways. You will be evaluating your circumstances and asking God to reveal His perspective on them. As you wait on the Lord, you will excitingly ask, seek, and knock.

Matthew 7:7-8

While you wait, continue doing the last thing God told you to do. In waiting, you are shifting the responsibility of the outcome to God—where it belongs. Then, when God gives you specific guidance, He will do more through you in days and weeks than you could ever accomplish in years of labor. Waiting on Him is always worth it. His timing and His ways are always right. You must depend on Him to guide you to accomplish His will.

Questions for Reflections

- ***What adjustment is God presently asking of you? Do these include; values, attitudes, actions and relationships?***
- ***Is there an adjustment God has been asking you to make which you have found difficult?***
- ***Is there something God is asking you to do now that you are resisting?***

8-2-23 Notes

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

Joining God Requires Obedience

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 18

Jesus answered and said to him, “If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him” (John 14:24).

“So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:33).

What is Obedience?

Servants of God do what He directs. They obey. The servant doesn't have the option of deciding whether or not to obey. Choosing not to do what God commands is rebellion, and such disobedience has consequences.

People are naturally self-centered; we want to please ourselves. We don't like others to tell us what to do. Jesus told a parable about obedience: ***“But what do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘My son, go work in the vineyard today.’ He answered, ‘I don’t want to!’ Yet later he changed his mind and went. Then the man went to the other and said the same thing. ‘I will, sir,’ he answered. But he didn’t go” (Matt. 21:28-30).***

Which son did the will of his father? Was it the one who said “no” but later repented, or the one who said “yes” but never went? The first son is the one who obeyed the father. Obedience means doing what is commanded. God's commands are not given so we can pick and choose the ones we want to obey. He expects us to do everything He tells us. When we are faithful and obedient in a little, He trusts us with more.

Obedience and God's Assignments

As we have said already, God has always been at work in our world, and He is now active where you are. When God is ready to involve you in an assignment, He will take the initiative to reveal what He is doing or what He is about to do. When He does, this will be the invitation for you to join Him.

8-2-23 Notes

Joining God may require major adjustments of your life to Him so He will accomplish His will through you. When you understand what God has said, when you know what He is about to do, and when you have made the necessary adjustments in your life, there is one remaining response to God. To experience Him at work in and through you, you must obey Him.

Moment of Truth

In the process of doing God's will, obedience is your moment of truth. Your obedience (or lack of it) will:

- Reveal what you believe about God.
- Determine whether you will experience His work in and through you.
- Determine whether you will come to know Him more intimately.

You obey because you trust God. You trust Him because you love Him. As you grow in your faith and obey God at every step, you'll move from a head knowledge of God to a personal relationship with the Person of Jesus Christ.

The Lord initiates the relationship by revealing His character and activity to you. The Holy Spirit is your teacher and guide, helping you trust God and obey Him. But you are the one who must respond in obedience. No one else can do this for you. When you trust God and take action to obey Him, you grow in Him.

The Importance of Obedience

Because you know God loves you, you should never question a directive from Him. It will always be right and best. When He expresses His will, you are not just to observe, discuss, or debate it. You are not called to "wrestle with it" as many do. You are to obey.

God blesses those who are obedient to Him (Deut. 28:1-14). The benefits of obedience are beyond our imagination, but they include being God's people (Jer. 7:23), having a solid foundation when the storms of life rage against you (Luke 6:46-49), and knowing spiritual truth (John 7:16-17).

The Cost of Obedience

Obedience has its costs. You cannot know and do the will of God without paying the price of adjustment. Counting the cost to follow God's will is one of the major adjustments you'll have to make. It is at the point of counting the cost that many stop following Jesus. Matter of fact, at this point ***"many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him"*** (John 6:66). Churches, also, must understand that

8-2-23 Notes

obedience often requires sacrifice. A congregation will not know and experience the fulfilling of God's purposes if its members are unwilling to pay the price of obedience.

In the first century, Saul, a Pharisee, was firmly established in the religious power structure of Jerusalem. He ruthlessly searched out Christians for imprisonment or execution. Then, on his way to Damascus, Saul encountered the living Christ. The resurrected Savior told Saul he had been chosen to preach the gospel to the Gentiles, and Saul had to make an about-face in his life. He went from persecuting Christians to proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ.

For Paul, the decision to obey Christ was costly. The persecutor became the persecuted. He was beaten and put in prison many times, and his life was constantly at risk with the religious establishment he had once helped to lead. Following God will lead to criticism and misunderstanding. Jesus told His followers to expect persecution if they followed Him (John 15:18-21).

Paul concluded one letter by saying, ***"I carry the marks of Jesus on my body"*** (Gal. 6:17). Paul didn't have these experiences before he began doing the will of his Lord. Although obedience is costly, it is always worth the price. Whenever you think the cost may be too great, consider what it will cost you not to do the will of God.

Adjustments in Prayer and the Cost

Often God waits to act until we ask in prayer. **Mark 11:24** holds a prayer promise that challenges us regarding the relationship of faith and prayer: ***"whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them."***

This verse is sometimes used to promote a name-it-and-claim-it theology. You decide what you want. You name that in your prayer, claim it, and it's yours. But that's a misguided and self-centered notion. Remember that only God takes the initiative. He gives you the desire to do His will (Phil. 2:13) and His Holy Spirit guides you to pray according to God's will (Rom. 8:26-28). In the God-centered approach, God leads you to pray according to His will and to believe that He will bring to pass what He has led you to pray. Then, continue praying in faith and watching for Him to keep His word.

Because an encounter with God entails a crisis of belief that may require major adjustments in your life, you need to learn how to pray. Even the prayer may be costly. You may need to let God wake you up in the middle of the night to pray. You may need to spend much time in prayer. Times may come when you pray late into the

8-2-23 Notes

night or even all night. Becoming a person of prayer requires a major adjustment of your life to God. Prayer will always be a part of your obedience because it is in a prayer relationship that God gives your direction.

Second Chances

The question is asked, “When a person disobeys God’s will, does God give him or her a second chance?” The answer is yes—sometimes. He does not always give second chances, and He is not obligated to. When God planned to call Nineveh to repentance, He asked Jonah to join Him. Jonah refused because he was prejudiced against “pagan enemies.” Jonah would rather have seen God destroy the city. Disobedience to God is extremely serious. Jonah went through the trauma of being thrown into a raging sea and spending three days inside a big fish. Jonah confessed and repented of his disobedience, and God gave him a second chance.

God wants to develop your character. He will let you go on in your disobedience but not without discipline to bring you back. In your relationship with God, you may make a wrong decision, but the Spirit of God will help you recognize that you are going against God’s will. He will guide you back to the right path and clarify what the Father wants. He may even take your disobedience and work it for good (Rom. 8:28) as He corrects and teaches you, His ways.

Even though God forgives and often gives second chances, the second chances are not guaranteed. When Aaron’s sons, Nadab and Abihu, were disobedient in offering unholy incense to the Lord, God struck them dead (Lev. 10:1-7).

In front of all Israel, Moses struck the rock saying, “***Listen, you rebels! Must we bring water out of this rock for you?***” (Num. 20:10). Notice the word “we.” God was the One who would bring water from the rock. Moses took God’s glory, and God did not remove the consequences of that disobedience. He refused to allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. In that instance God gave no second chance.

Summary

Both major adjustments and costly obedience come before you experience God’s presence and power. Many believers and churches come to this moment of truth and decide the cost is too great. What they often do not consider is what it may cost them not to obey. When God gives you an assignment, the obedience may require sacrifice for you and for those around you.

Nevertheless, obedience to God is not an option—it is required of every servant. When you obey, God accomplishes what He purposed, and you will be overwhelmed

8-2-23 Notes

with the experience of God's power and presence. You and those around you will come to a greater knowledge of God. Whenever you sense obedience is too costly, that indicates you have misunderstood who you are and what you have. As a disciple of Christ, you have been bought with a price, and you are not your own.

Everything you have belongs to God. You are a manager of God's resources. Since you belong to Him, renew your dedication to Him for His purposes. Pray and agree with God that anything He asks is well with you. Commit yourself to pay the price to obey His will. Begin watching now for the opportunity to obey what God asks.

Questions for Reflection

- How has your following God cost others?
- How has other's obedience to God cost you?
- Have you ever suffered the consequences of not obeying God? If so, what were they?

08/02/23

Bible Study notes for 8-9-23

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

Returning to God

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 19

“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as in the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day is approaching” (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Restoring Broken Relationships with God

There are times in every believer’s life when one senses a clear loss of intimacy with God. Even the most devout believer can find their love for God has cooled if they are not careful. How does this happen? What are the signs, and how can we restore a relationship with God once it has been broken?

The main question is, how do we lose intimacy with God? There are three parables of Jesus in Luke 15 that describe how this can happen.

The lost sheep (vv. 3-7). How do sheep get lost? They normally are drawn away by distractions. They don’t consciously choose to wander from the rest of the flock. They simply follow whatever catches their interests at the moment. Going from one thing to the next gradually draws the sheep farther and farther from where it should be until it is hopelessly lost in serious danger.

The lost coin (vv. 8-10). Valuable possessions are generally lost through carelessness. No one means to lose something precious, but by not taking precautions, we can misplace a treasured object. Nothing is more priceless than our relationship with God. Yet we can neglect it because of our preoccupation with daily concerns. In the busyness of life, we forget to pray and we cut short our times with the Lord. Then one day we discover God seems far from us. We have unintentionally lost the intimacy we once enjoyed with Him.

The prodigal son (vv. 11-32). In this story, the son chooses to leave home to indulge in a lifestyle that dishonors his father. Tragically, there are those who deliberately abandon their fellowship with Christ. Maybe they decide they want to follow worldly pleasures or they refuse to obey what God has clearly commanded—such

Bible Study notes for 8-9-23

as forgiving someone who has offended them. Some move far from where they once were with God. Only a willful, repentant choice to return to God can bring someone back who has moved far away.

Our departure from God may go unnoticed—at least at first. But before long, the fact that we are now far from the Lord becomes obvious to us and to those who observe us. There are at least four ways you can determine if you have drawn apart from God.

First: *You no longer hear from God* (Amos 8:11-12). Deuteronomy 30:17 says, **“But if your heart turns away from God and you do not listen...”** Scripture warns that disobedience to God eventually leads to spiritual deafness. The longer we refuse to heed a word from God, the harder our hearts become toward Him. Sooner or later, we will have hardened ourselves against God’s Word to the point that our heart becomes resistant to anything God says.

Second: *You lose your joy.* Jesus claimed He had given the disciples His teaching so **“that My joy may be in you, and your joy may be complete” (John 15:11)**. Since the natural by-product of abiding in Christ is joy, a joyless believer is a contradiction in terms. But when we become so preoccupied with concerns and various tasks that we fail to abide in Christ, our joy in the Lord unavoidably fades away.

Third: *Your life does not produce spiritual fruit.* The natural result of abiding in Christ is spiritual fruit. Galatians 5:22-23 identifies the fruit the Spirit produces in a believer’s life: *love, joy, peace, patience, and self-control*. The more such fruit there is in your life, the more like Jesus you will be. Spiritual fruit is not something you produce by your own effort. It is the outgrowth of an intimate relationship with Christ.

Fourth: *You no longer experience spiritual victory in your life.* Scripture promises that if God is for us, nothing can stand against us (Rom. 8:31). However, if God is not for us, then we will experience continual defeat. In Old Testament times, God cautioned His people that one clear way to measure if they were pleasing to God was whether or not they were victorious over their enemies. When God’s people experienced defeat, according to Scripture, it was an undeniable sign that they were no longer pleasing to God.

Bible Study notes for 8-9-23

Spiritual Warfare

The safest thing to do as a believer is to guard your relationship with God so you do not depart from Him in the first place. But how do you protect your relationship with God? You can do the following four things:

1. **Proverbs 4:23** cautions: ***“Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”*** The heart is the core of our being. It is the arena in which we experience our greatest spiritual victories as well as our most devastating defeats. We cannot afford to neglect it or to take its condition for granted. When we allow ourselves to be exposed to sin or we let unforgiveness and bitterness dwell within us, we will no longer enjoy the intimacy with God we once did. Only you can guard your heart. No one else can do that for you. It takes conscious, sustained effort to protect yourself from sinful, destructive thoughts and habits.
2. **Proverbs 11:14** warns: ***“Without guidance, people fall, but with many counselors there is deliverance.”*** Our hearts are desperately wicked, and they can easily deceive us (Jer. 17:9). We might believe we are sharing a prayer request with others out of concern for someone when in fact we are just gossiping. We may think we are relating a personal testimony at our church for the glory of God when in fact we are bragging.

That is why surrounding ourselves with godly friends who feel free to voice their concerns to us is healthy. Such advisors rarely volunteer for this service in your life. You must enlist them and invite them to share any counsel with you they believe you need to hear. Having people around who care about you and who will alert you when they see your heart shifting away from God can save you much heartache.

3. Jesus said, ***“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37).*** That should be the gauge for your Christian life. Every so often mediate on your love for God. Ask, “Am I loving my God with all my heart, or have other affections begun crowding out my devotion to Him?” Then examine your soul: are the deepest parts of your life totally devoted to God? Survey your mind. Are your thoughts subjected to Christ and your love for Him? When you find you are not loving God as you should, immediately take action to return to your love relationship with God.
4. Jesus also said: ***“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock” (Matt.***

Bible Study notes for 8-9-23

7:24). Loving God is a choice we make. Love is never just a feeling or a thought. Love requires action. If you love God, you will put into practice God's commands found in Scripture. It is too late to begin trying to follow God's instructions when the storms of life assault you. Adopt a lifestyle of immediate obedience. Then when trial come, your life will be firmly grounded in God's Word, and nothing will be able to harm your relationship with Him.

If you find you are not as excited and devoted to God as you once were, take time to pray. Return to God and immediately begin to experience His presence returning in your life. If you have not departed from God, prayerfully commit yourself to remain steadfast and true to Him.

Conclusion

Reflect on your walk with God. Is it more vibrant and powerful now than it has ever been? Or has something been lost? If you sense you are not walking with God as closely as you once did, ask the Holy Spirit to alert you to any areas where you have been guilty of departing from God.

Questions for Reflections

- Take a moment to consider any evidence in your life that you have wandered from your love relationship with God.
- Are you regularly hearing God speak to you?
- Is your life filled with the joy of the Lord?
- Are you seeing spiritual fruit in your life?
- Are you experiencing victory?
- Are you presently loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength? If you are not, what might you do today to rekindle your love for God?

08/09/23

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

God Speaks Through the Church

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 20

“But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does it share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

God gave our bodies many different senses and parts. When each part does its job and when each part pays proper attention to the others, the whole body works the way it should.

A church is the body of Christ. It functions best when all of its members are able to share what they sense God is doing and saying. Members of a congregation can't fully know God's will for their lives apart from the testimony of other members. A church needs to hear the whole counsel of God through its members. Then it can proceed in confidence and unity to do God's will.

The Body of Christ

Many believers today feel that their walk with God is private and independent. They see no need for joining a church or making themselves accountable to other believers. Some view the church in terms of how it can help them accomplish the ministry God has given them personally, rather than seeking how their lives fit into the congregation. The Bible teaches that our walk with God is personal, but it is not private. Sin makes people independent. Salvation makes us interdependent on one another. Scripture teaches that the church is a body in which each member is vitally important to the others.

While believers have personal access to God through Christ as their one Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), God created the church as His redemptive agent in the world. He is at work accomplishing His purposes, and He places every member in a church to accomplish His purposes through each congregation.

Jesus Christ is present as Head of every local church (Eph. 4:15), and every member is placed in the body as it pleases God (1 Cor. 12:18). The Holy Spirit manifests

Himself to every person for the common good (1 Cor. 12:7), and the whole body is fitted together by the Father. Members are enabled and equipped by the Holy Spirit to function where the Father has placed them in the body. Then the body functions as Christ leads, until every member becomes spiritually mature (Eph. 4:13). Believers need each other. What one member lacks, others can supply.

What God is doing in and through the body is essential to your knowing how to respond to Him. Where you see Him working in the body, you make the necessary adjustments and put your life there too. In the church, allow God to use you in any way He chooses to complete His work. This was Paul's goal when he said, "***We proclaim Him, warning and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ***" (Col. 1:28). Paul constantly urged believers to become involved with his life and ministry. The effectiveness of Paul's ministry rested on them.

Depending On God to Speak Through the Church

It's important to note that a need does not constitute a call. Without proper guidance, many well-meaning believers see every need in their church as a divine call for them to respond. Don't ever be afraid to let the body of believers assist you in knowing God's will.

Sometimes God may speak through one person. Keep in mind, that one individual is not the church. Usually, you need to take all the counsel of people for clear direction. What you will find is that a number of things begin to line up. What you are hearing from the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church will all point to the same thing. Then you can proceed with confidence.

Trust God to give direction through other believers. Turn to them for advice on major decisions. Listen to anything the church has to say to you. Then let God confirm what His message is for you. Often, relating what God is doing in your life may help someone else encounter God in a meaningful way.

God speaks to His people by the Holy Spirit. He can speak in any way He chooses, but the most common ways through which God speaks today include the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church. He speaks to reveal Himself, His purposes, and His ways. When what God says through the Bible, prayer, circumstances, and the church line up to say the same thing, you can move forward, knowing that you are following God's directions.

Each believer is independent with all the others to function correctly in that body. You cannot fully know God's will for your involvement in the body of Christ apart from the counsel God provides through other members. All members of the body belong to each other, and they need each other. You can and should depend on God to speak through other believers and the church to help you know what assignment you are to carry out in the ministry of the kingdom.

Pray for your church and the way God Works in and through its members to help believers understand God's call. Reflect on times and ways God has spoken to you through other believers, and thank God for using them to speak to you.

Questions for Reflection

- ***Are you interconnected in a church body so God can speak to you through other church members?***
- ***How do you respond when you become aware of a need in your church that you might meet? How do you know if you are the person God wants to use to meet that need?***
- ***How is God presently using you to minister to other members of your church body? Are you actively seeking His will in this regard?***

08/16/23

GOD: KNOWING AND DOING HIS WILL

Conclusion

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 21

“Now unto Him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” (Jude 24).

Some two thousand years ago, two discouraged men were walking together to the town of Emmaus, approximately seven miles from Jerusalem (Luke 24:13-35). They had chosen to follow Jesus and had been excited about all He had done and taught. But Jesus had been cruelly taken from them. Now, they were confused, not knowing what to do next.

Suddenly, a stranger joined them and asked what they were talking about. They explained what had happened and how they could no longer follow Jesus as they had planned. During the next few hours, the stranger explained that the events surrounding Jesus’ death were not the end but rather the beginning of an exciting new opportunity to walk daily with the Son of God. The stranger was the risen Christ Himself!

From this material we have studied on “Knowing and Doing God’s Will,” I pray God has shown you can experience a love relationship with Him that is real and fresh every day. I trust you have been challenged to see where God is at work and then to join Him. I hope you have made the adjustments in your life God has asked of you, and now you are now obeying everything He told you to do.

But all of this is only the beginning! There is far more God wants you to know and experience of Him. There are new truths He wants you to understand so they can set you free (John 8:32). There is far more of God’s nature, His purposes, and ways He still wants to reveal. This study should be the starting point for a whole new adventure in following Christ daily.

As you come to the end of this study, there are several important questions to think about: What are some things God has taught you about Himself as we have shared this information? What has God revealed to you about your walk with Him? What are some commitments you have made to God through these lessons?

As we prepare to move on to the next stage in our walk with God, here are a few practices that will help us to continue our spiritual growth:

1) *Stay regularly immersed in God's Word.* Remember God's instruction to Joshua: ***"This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to recite it day and night, so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do"*** (Josh. 1:8). Make it a habit to be in God's Word daily.

God has many truths to reveal if you will give Him the opportunity. **Ephesians 5:26** gives the wonderful picture of Christ preparing the church to be His bride. Scripture say, ***"To make her holy, cleansing her in the washing of water by the word."*** As the church is immersed in God's Word, the Spirit of God uses Scripture to convict and cleanse God's people of sin and to become spotless before Him. Regularly spending time in studying the Bible allows the Holy Spirit to cleanse you of any sin and to increasingly make you like Christ.

2) *Remain intimately involved with a church family that will love and nurture you.* Hebrews urges us: ***"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as you see the day approaching"*** (Hebrews 10:25). God made believers interdependent (co-dependent). You cannot experience all God has for you apart from the rest of the body of Christ. Surround yourself with people who have a passion for Christ and His Word and who are willing to encourage you and to hold you accountable to the word God speaks to you.

3) *Pray regularly.* Daniel made it a habit to pray three times daily (Dan. 6:10). As a result, he had a powerful prayer life in which God answered him the moment he began to speak (Dan. 9:23). One of the best ways to prevent your heart from growing cold is to talk regularly with God. As you commune with Him, keep your focus on Him and remember to follow Him every day. Prayer is a two-way communication through which God also speaks to you. It is difficult to talk with God each day and continue to sin.

4) *Keep your promises to God.* Ecclesiastes warns: ***"When you make a vow to God, don't delay fulfilling it, because He does not delight in fools. Fulfill what you vow. Better that you do not vow than that you vow and not fulfill it"*** (Eccles. 5:4-5). Throughout the Bible, God may have spoken to you, and you've made commitments to Him in response. Remember that God takes our promises to Him extremely seriously. So, be diligent to follow through with everything you promised God you

would do. Keep in mind that a good intention is not the same as obedience. There are no substitutes for obedience.

5) *Process what God has done in your life as you read His Word.* God may have spoken to you many times, but if you don't let the truths soak into your heart and take root in your life, it will be like the seed that fell on stony ground and was soon taken away (Matt. 13:20-21). Processing God's Word means allowing God to explain and apply all He has said to you. It is not enough to agree with what God said. You must also apply God's Word in your heart and life. This involves action.

If, for instance, God spoke to you about forgiveness, it is not enough to believe in forgiveness. You must ask God to examine your heart and relationships to see if there is anyone you have not truly forgiven. If God reveals someone, ask Him to show what action you must take to be reconciled. Then do what He says.

Don't consider God's truth as doctrine to be believed but as a reality that must be lived and experienced. Identify all the truths God brought to your attention, and then meditate on them until you are sure you understand and experience everything God intended when He reveal the truth to you.

08/23/23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

A Heart Like His

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 1

“And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:23-24).

What God wants is for you to ***“think and act like Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5)***. God’s plans for you is nothing short of a new heart. If you were a car, God would want control of your engine. If you were a computer, God would claim the software and the hard drive. If you were an airplane, He would take His seat in the cockpit. But you are a person, so, God wants to change your heart.

God wants you to be just like Jesus. He wants you to have a heart like His. If a sentence or two could capture God’s desire for each of us, it might read like this: *God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus.*

God loves you just the way you are. If you think His love for you would be stronger if your faith were, you are wrong. If you think His love for you would be deeper if your thoughts were, wrong again. Don’t confuse God’s love with the love of people. The love of people often increases with performance and decreases with mistakes. Not so with God’s love. He loves you right where you are.

Granted God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. Picture this; you take your child to the park to play in the sand-box, an ice cream truck comes along and buy them a treat, and then turned to give it to them, and you noticed that their mouth was full of sand. Where you intended to put a treat, they had put dirt.

Did you love them with dirt in their mouth? Absolutely. Was your child any less your child with dirt in their mouth? Definitely not. Were you going to allow them to keep the dirt in their mouth? Not hardly. You love them right where they are, but you refused to leave them there. You carry them over to the water fountain and washed out their mouth. Why? Because you love them.

God does the same for us. He holds us over the fountain. “Spit out the dirt,” our Father urges. “I’ve got something better for you.” And so, He cleanses us of filth: immorality, dishonesty, prejudice, bitterness, and greed. We don’t enjoy the cleansing; sometimes we even opt for the dirt over the ice cream. But if we do, the loss is ours. God has a better offer. He wants us to be just like Jesus.

The good news is that you aren’t stuck with today’s personality. You aren’t condemned to always being grumpy. You are tweakable. Even if you’ve worried each day of your life, you need not worry the rest of your life.

Where did we get the idea, we can’t change? We even say, “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” First of all, we are not dogs and secondly, we are not doing tricks. Where did the statements come from such as, “It just my nature to worry,” or, “I’ll always be pessimistic. I’m just that way,” or “I have a bad temper. I can’t help the way I react”? Listen, would we make the same statements about our bodies? I don’t think so.

If our bodies malfunction, we seek for help. Shouldn’t we do the same with our hearts? Shouldn’t we seek help for our attitudes? Can’t we request treatment for our selfish behaviors? We can. Jesus can change our hearts. He wants us to have a heart like His. I assure you, there is no better offer.

The Heart of Christ

The heart of Jesus was pure. The Savior was adored by thousands, yet content to live a simple life. He was cared for by women (Luke 8:1-3), yet never accused of lustful **thoughts**; scorned by His own creation, but willing to forgive them before they even requested His mercy. Peter, who traveled with Jesus for three and a half years, described Him as a **“lamb, without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19)**. After spending the same amount of time with Jesus, John concluded, **“And in Him is no sin” (1 John 3:5)**.

Jesus’ heart was peaceful. The disciples fretted over the need to feed the thousands, but not Jesus. He thanked God for the problem. The disciples shouted for fear in the storm, but not Jesus. He slept through it. Peter drew his sword to fight the soldiers, but not Jesus. He lifted His hand to heal. His heart was at peace. When His disciples abandoned Him, did He pout and went home? When Peter denied Him, did Jesus lose His temper? When the soldiers spit in His face, did He breathe fire in theirs? Far from it. He was at peace. He forgave them. He refused to be guided by vengeance.

He also refused to be guided by anything other than His high call. His heart was purposeful. Most lives aim at nothing in particular and achieve it. Jesus aimed at one goal—to save humanity from its sin. He could summarize His life with one sentence: ***“The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10)***. Jesus was so focused on His task that He knew when to say, ***“My time has not yet come” (John 2:4)*** and when to say, ***“It is finished” (John 19:30)***. But He was not so focused on His goal that He was unpleasant.

How pleasant were His thoughts! Children couldn’t resist Jesus. He could find beauty in lilies, joy in worship, and possibilities in problems. He would spend days with multitudes of sick people and still feel sorry for them. He spent over three decades wading through the muck and mire of our sins yet saw enough beauty in us to die for our mistakes.

But the crowning attribute of Christ was this: His heart was spiritual. His thoughts reflected His intimate relationship with the Father. ***“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” John 14:11)***. His first recorded sermon begins with the words, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me” (Luke 4:18)***. He was ***“led by the Spirit” (Matt. 4:1)*** and ***“full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1)***. He returned from the desert ***“in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14)***.

Jesus took His instructions from God. It was His habit to go to worship (Luke 4:16). It was His practice to memorize scripture (Luke 4:4). Luke says Jesus ***“often slipped away to be alone so He could pray” (Luke 5:16)***. His times of prayer guided Him. He once returned from prayer and announced it was time to move to another city (Mark 1:38). Another time of prayer resulted in the selection of the disciples (Luke 6:12-13). Jesus was led by an unseen hand. ***“The Son does whatever the Father does (John 5:19)***. In the same chapter He stated, ***“I can do nothing alone. I judge only the way I am told” (John 5:30)***. The heart of Jesus was spiritual.

The Heart of Man

Our hearts seem so far from His. He is pure: we are greedy. He is peaceful; we are rushed. He is purposeful; we are distracted. He is pleasant; we are cranky. He is spiritual; we are earthbound. The distance between our hearts and His seems so huge. How could we ever hope to have the heart of Jesus?

Well, listen to this! You already do. You already have the heart of Christ. If you are in Christ, you already have the heart of Christ. One of the supreme yet unrealized promises of God is simply this: if you have given your life to Jesus, Jesus has given Himself to you. He has moved in and unpacked His bags and is ready to change you

“into His likeness from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul explains it with these words: ***“Strange as it seems, we Christians actually do have within us a portion of the very thoughts and mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16 TLB).***

Strange is the word! If I have the mind of Christ, why do I still think so much like me? If I have the heart of Christ, why do I still have the hangups of Potts? If Jesus dwells within me, why do I still hate long lines in Wally World?

Part of the answer is illustrated in a story about a lady who had a small house on the seashore of Ireland at the turn of the century. She was quite wealthy but also quite thrifty. The people were surprised, then, when she decided to be among the first to have electricity in her home.

Several weeks after the installation, a meter reader appeared at her door. He asked if her electricity was working well, and she assured him it was. “I’m wondering if you can explain something to me, he said. “Your meter shows hardly any usage. Are you using your power?” “Certainly,” she answered. “Each evening when the sun sets, I turn on my lights just long enough to light my candles; then I turn them off.”

She’s tapped into the power but don’t use it. Her house is connected but there is no difference/change. Don’t we make the same mistake? We, too—with our souls saved but our hearts unchanged—are connected but no change. Trusting Christ for salvation but resisting transformation. We occasionally flip the switch, but most of the time we settle for the shadows.

What would happen if we left the light on? What would happen if we not only flipped the switch but lived in the light? What changes would occur if we set about the task of dwelling in the radiance of Christ?

No doubt about it: God has ambitious plans for us. The same one who saved your soul longs to remake your heart. His plan is nothing short of a total transformation. God is willing to change us into the likeness of the Savior. Shall we accept His offer? Here is my suggestion.

Let’s imagine what it means to be just like Jesus. Let’s look long into the heart of Christ. Let’s spend some time considering His compassion, reflecting upon His intimacy with the Father, admiring His focus, pondering His endurance. How did He forgive? When did He pray? What made Him so pleasant? Why didn’t He give up? Let’s ***“fix our eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12:2).*** Perhaps in seeing Him, we will see what we can become. 08/30/23

9-6-23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

Loving the People You Are Stuck With

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 2

John 13:2-5

Jesus Himself knew the feeling of being stuck with someone. For three years He ran with the same crew. Matter of fact, He saw the same dozen or so faces around the table, around the campfire, around the clock. They rode in the same boats and walked the same roads and visited the same houses, and its make you wonder, how did Jesus stay so devoted to His men?

Not only did He have to put up with their visible peculiarities, He had to endure their invisible shortcomings. Think about it. He could hear their unspoken thoughts. He knew their private doubts. Not only that, He knew every mistake your loved ones had ever made and every mistake they would ever make? What if you knew every thought they would have about you, every irritation, every dislike, every betrayal?

Was it hard for Jesus to love Peter, knowing Peter would someday curse Him? Was it tough to trust Thomas, knowing Thomas would one day question Jesus' resurrection? How did Jesus resist the urge to recruit a new batch of followers? John wanted to destroy one enemy. Peter sliced off the ear of another. Just days before Jesus' death, His disciples were arguing about which of them was the best! How was He able to love people who were hard to love? How was Jesus able to love His disciples? The answer is found in the thirteenth chapter of John.

Of all the times we see the bowing knees of Jesus, none is so precious as when He kneels before His disciples and washes their feet. Jesus stands and removes His outer garment. He wraps a servant's girdle around His waist, takes up the basin, and kneels before one of the disciples. He unlaces a sandal and gently lifts the foot and places it in the basin, covers it with water, one grimy foot after another, Jesus works His way down the row.

In Jesus's day the washing of feet was a task reserved not just for servants but for the lowest of servants. The servant at the bottom of the totem pole was expected to be the one on his knees with the towel and basin.

9-6-23

You can be sure Jesus knows the future of these feet He is washing. These twenty-four feet will not spend the next day following their master, defending His cause. These feet will run for cover at the flash of a Roman sword. Only one pair of feet won't abandon Him in the garden. One disciple won't desert Him at Gethsemane, Judas won't make it that far! He will abandon Jesus that very night at the table.

What a passionate moment when Jesus silently lifts the feet of His betrayer and washes them in the basin! Within hours the feet of Judas, cleansed by the kindness of the one he will betray, will stand in Caiaphas's court. Jesus knows what these men are about to do. He knows they are about to perform the vilest act of their lives.

By morning they will bury their heads in shame and look down at their feet in disgust. And when they do, He wants them to remember how His knees knelt before them and He washed their feet. He wants them to realize those feet are still clean. ***“You don't understand now what I am doing, but you will understand later” (John 13:7).*** He forgave their sin before they even committed it. He offered mercy before they even wanted it.

From the Basin of His Grace

Oh, I could never do that, you object. The hurt is so deep. The wounds are so many. Just seeing the person causes me to cringe. Perhaps that is your problem. Perhaps you are seeing the wrong person, or at least too much of the wrong person. Remember, the secret of having a heart like Jesus is “fixing our eyes” on Him. Try shifting your glance away from the one who hurt you and setting your eyes on the one who has saved you.

“If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought also to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

Jesus washes our feet for two reasons. The first is to give us mercy; the second is to give us a message, and that message is simply this: Jesus offers unconditional grace; we are to offer unconditional grace. The mercy of Christ preceded our mistakes; our mercy must precede the mistakes of others. Those in the circle of Christ had no doubt of His love; those in our circles should have no doubts about ours.

What does it mean to have a heart like this? It means to kneel as Jesus knelt, touching the grimy parts of the people we are stuck with and washing away their unkindnesses with kindness. Or as Paul wrote, ***“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted,***

9-6-23

forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Eph. 4:32).

But you say, "I've done nothing wrong. I'm not the one who messed up. I'm not the guilty one here." Perhaps you aren't. But neither was Jesus. Of all the men in that room, only one was worthy of having His feet washed. And He was the one who washed the feet. The one worthy of being served, served others. The genius of Jesus' example is that the burden of bridge-building falls on the strong one, not the weak one. The one who is innocent is the one who makes the gesture. Understand, *relationships don't thrive because the guilty are punished but because the innocent are merciful.*

Certain conflicts can be resolved only with a basin of water. Are any relationships in your world thirsty for mercy? Is there any sitting around your table who need to be assured of your grace? Jesus made sure His disciples had no reason to doubt His love. Why don't you do the same?

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves, For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was" (James 1:22-24).

09/06/23

9-20-23 Bible Study Notes

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

The Touch of God

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 3

I am going to ask you to look at your hand for a moment. Look at the back, then the palm. Reacquaint yourself with your fingers. Run a thumb over your knuckles. What if someone were to film a documentary on your hands? What if a producer were to tell your story based on the life of your hands? What would we see?

As with all of us, the film would begin with a newborn's fist, then a closeup of a tiny hand wrapped around mommy's finger. Then holding on to a chair as you learned to walk. Then handling a spoon as you learned to eat.

We aren't too long into the feature before we see your hand being affectionate, stroking daddy's face or petting a puppy. Nor is it too long before we see your hand acting aggressively: pushing big brother or yanking back a toy. All of us learned early that the hand is suited for more than survival—it's a tool of emotional expression. The same hand can help or hurt, extend, lift someone up or shove someone down.

Were you to show the documentary to your friends, you would be proud of certain moments: your hand extending with a gift, placing a ring on another's finger, doctoring an injury, preparing a meal, or folding in prayer. And then there are other scenes. Shots of accusing fingers, abusive fists. Hands taking more often than giving, demanding instead of offering, hurting rather than loving.

Oh, the power of the hands. Leave them unmanaged and they become weapons: clawing for power, strangling for survival, seducing for pleasure. But manage them and our hands become instruments of grace—not just tools in the hands of God, but *God's very hands*. Surrender them and these five-fingered appendages become the hands of heaven.

That's what Jesus did. Our Savior completely surrendered His hands to God. The documentary of His hands has no scenes of greedy grabbing or unfounded finger pointing. It does, however, have one scene after another of people longing for His compassionate touch: parents carrying their children, the poor bringing their fears, the sinful shouldering their sorrows. And each who came was touched. And each one

9-20-23 Bible Study Notes

touched was changed. But none was touched or changed more than the unnamed leper of Matthew 8.

Matthew 8:1-4

Mark and Luke chose to tell this same story. But with all three writers, they don't tell enough. Yeah, we know the man's disease and his decision, but as to the rest, we are left with questions. The authors offer no name, no history, no description. I wonder about this man who felt Jesus' compassionate touch. He makes one appearance, has one request, and receives one touch. But that one touch changed his life forever. And I wonder if his story went something like this:

For years, no one touched me. No one! Not one person. Not my wife. Not my child. Not my friends. No one touched me. They saw me. They spoke to me. I sensed love in their voices. I saw concern in their eyes. But I didn't feel their touch. There was no touch. Not once. No one touched me.

What is common to you, I coveted/wanted. Handshakes. Warm embraces. A tap on the shoulder to get my attention. A kiss on the lips to steal a heart. Such moments were taken from my world. No one touched me. No one bumped into me. What I would have given to be bumped into, to be caught in a crowd, for my shoulder to brush against another's. But for years it has not happened. How could it? I was not allowed on the streets. Even the animals kept their distance from me. I was not permitted in my synagogue. Not even welcome in my own house.

I was untouchable. I was a leper. And no one touched me. Until today.

I wonder about this man because in New Testament times leprosy was the most dreaded disease. The condition made the body a mass of ulcers and decay. Fingers would curl. Blotches of skin would discolor and smell. Certain types of leprosy would numb nerve endings, leading to a loss of fingers, toes, even a whole foot or hand. Leprosy was death, inch by inch.

The social consequences were as severe as the physical. Considered contagious, the leper was quarantined, banished to a leper colony. In Scripture the leper is symbolic of the ultimate outcast: infected by a condition he did not seek, rejected by those he knew, avoided by people he did not know, condemned to a future he could not bear. And in the memory of each outcast must have been the day he was forced to face the truth: life would never be the same.

9-20-23 Bible Study Notes

The banishing of a leper seems harsh, unnecessary. The Ancient East has not been the only culture to isolate their wounded, however. We may not build colonies or cover our mouths in their presence, but we certainly build walls and look the other way. And a person need not have leprosy to feel quarantined.

The divorced know this feeling. So do the disabled. The unemployed have felt it, as have the less educated. Some shun unmarried mothers. We keep our distance from the depressed and avoid the terminally ill. We have convalescent homes for the elderly, schools for the simple, centers for the addicted, and prisons for the criminals.

The rest simply try to get away from it all. Only God knows how many individuals living quiet, lonely lives infected by their fear of rejection and the memories of the last time they tried. They choose not to be touched at all rather than risk being hurt again.

The Power of The Godly Touch

Notice now, the touch did not heal the disease. Matthew is careful to mention that it was the pronouncement and not the touch of Christ that cured the condition. ***“Jesus reached out His hand and touched the man and said, ‘I will. Be healed!’ And immediately the man was healed from his disease” (Matt. 8:3).***

The infection was banished by a word from Jesus. But the loneliness was treated by a touch from Jesus. Oh, the power of a godly touch. Have you ever experienced such? The doctor who treated you, or the teacher who dried your tears? Was there a hand holding yours at a funeral? Another on your shoulder during a difficult time? A handshake of welcome at a new job? A pastoral prayer for healing? Haven't we known the power of a godly touch?

Can't we offer the same? Many of you already do. Some of you have the master touch of the Physician Himself. You use your hands to pray over the sick and minister to the weak. If you aren't touching them personally, your hands are writing letters, making phone calls, preparing treats. You have learned the power of a touch.

But others of us tend to forget. Our hearts are good; it's just that our memories are bad. We forget how meaningful one touch can be. We fear saying the wrong thing or using the wrong tone or acting the wrong way. So, rather than do it incorrectly, we do nothing at all.

Aren't we glad Jesus didn't make the same mistake? If your fear of doing the wrong thing prevents you from doing anything, keep in mind the perspective of the lepers

9-20-23 Bible Study Notes

of the world. They aren't picky. They aren't finicky. They're just lonely. They are yearning for a godly touch.

Jesus touched the untouchables of the world. Will you do the same?

09/20/23

Bible Study Notes: 9-27-23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

Hearing God's Voice

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 4

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” More than once, Jesus said these words. Eight times in the Gospels and eight times in the Book of Revelation we are reminded that it's not enough just to have ears—it's necessary to use them.

In one of His parables, Jesus compared our ears to soil. He told about a farmer who scattered seed (symbolic of the Word) in four different types of ground (symbolic of our ears). Some of our ears are like a hard road—unreceptive to the seed. Others have ears like rocky soil—we hear the Word but don't allow it to take root. Still others have ears akin to a weed patch—too overgrown, too thorny, with too much competition for the seed to have a chance. And then there are some who have ears that hear: well-tilled and ready to hear God's voice.

Notice now, in all four cases the seed is the same seed. The Sower is the same Sower. What's different is not the message or the messengers—it's the listener. It's not that we don't have ears; it's that we don't use them. Scripture has always placed a premium on hearing God's voice.

The great command from God through Moses began with the words, ***“Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God is one LORD”*** (Deut. 6:4). ***“Happy are those who listen to Me”*** is the promise of **Proverbs 8:34**. Jesus urges us to learn to listen like sheep. ***“The sheep recognize His voice. . . they follow because they are familiar with [the shepherd's] voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it”*** (John 10:3-5). Each of the seven churches in Revelation is addressed in the same manner: ***“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”***

Our ears, unlike our eyes, do not have lids. They are to remain open, but how easily they close.

Pilate had the classic case of ears that didn't hear. Not only did his wife warn him, ***“Don't do anything to that man, because He is innocent”*** (Matt. 27:19), but the very Word of Life stood before Pilate in his chamber and proclaimed, ***“Everyone***

Bible Study Notes: 9-27-23

who belongs to the truth listens to me” (John 18:37). But Pilate had selective hearing. He allowed the voices of the people to dominate the voices of conscience and the carpenter. *“Their voices prevailed”* (Luke 23:23). In the end Pilate inclined his ear to the crowd and away from the Christ and ignored the message of the Messiah. *“Faith comes from hearing”* (Rom. 10:17), and since Pilate didn’t hear, he never found faith.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” How long has it been since you had your hearing checked? When God throws seed your way, what is the result? How long since you gave him a portion of undiluted, uninterrupted time listening for His voice? Apparently, Jesus did. He made a deliberate effort to spend time with God. He spent regular time with God, praying and listening. Mark says, *“Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where He prayed”* (Mark 1:35). Luke tells us, *“Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed”* (Luke 5:16).

Not only did He spend regular time with God in prayer, He spent regular time in God’s Word. Of course, we don’t find Jesus pulling a leather-bound New Testament from His satchel and reading it. We do, however, see the example of Jesus in the wilderness temptation, using the Word of God to deal with Satan. Three times He is tempted, and each time He repels the attack with the phrase: *“It is written in the Scriptures”* (Luke 4:4, 8, 12), and then He quotes a verse. Jesus is so familiar with Scripture that He not only knows the verse, He knows how to use it.

And then, there’s the occasion when Jesus was asked to read in the synagogue. He is handed the book of Isaiah the prophet. He finds the passage, reads it, and declares, *“While you heard these word just now, they were coming true!”* (Luke 4:21). We are given the picture of a person who knows His way around in Scripture and can recognize its fulfillment. If Jesus thought it wise to grow familiar with the Bible, we should do the same.

If we are to be just like Jesus—if we are to have ears that hear God’s voice—then we have just found two habits worth imitating: the habits of prayer and Bible reading. Well, some of us have tried to have daily quiet time and have not been successful. Others of us have a hard time concentrating. And all of us are busy. So, rather than spend time with God, listening for His voice, we will let others spend time with Him and then benefit from their experience. Let them tell us what God is saying.

Bible Study Notes: 9-27-23

If that is your approach, if your spiritual experiences are second-hand and not firsthand, I have a question for you: Do you do that with other parts of your life? I don't think so.

You don't do that with vacations. You don't say, "Vacations are such a hassle, packing bags and traveling. I'm going to send someone on vacation for me. When he returns, I'll hear about it and be spared all the inconvenience." I don't believe you would do that. You want the experience firsthand. You want the sights firsthand, and you want to rest firsthand. Certain things no one can do for you.

You don't do that with romance. You don't say, "I'm in love with that wonderful person, but romance is such a hassle. I'm going to hire a stand-in lover to enjoy the romance in my place. I'll hear all about it and be spared the inconvenience." I don't believe you would do that. You want the romance firsthand. You don't want to miss a word or a date, and you certainly don't want to miss the kiss, right? Certain things no one can do for you.

You don't let someone eat on your behalf, do you? You don't say, "Chewing is such a bother. My jaws get so tired, and the variety of tastes is so overwhelming. I'm going to hire someone to chew my food, and I'll just swallow whatever he gives me." I don't believe you would do that. Certain things no one can do for you.

And one of those is spending time with God. Listening to God is a firsthand experience. When He asks for your attention, God doesn't want you to send a substitute; He wants you. He invites you to vacation in His splendor. He invites you to feel the touch of His hand. He invites you to feast at His table. He wants to spend time with you. And with a little training, your time with God can be the highlight of your day.

Equipped with the right tools, we can learn to listen to God. What are those tools? Here are the ones I have found helpful.

A Regular Time and Place

Select a slot on your schedule and a corner of your world, and claim it for God. For some it may be best to do this in the morning. "***In the morning my prayer comes before you***" (Ps. 88:13). Others prefer the evening and agree with David's prayer, "***Let my . . . praise be like the evening sacrifice***" (Ps. 141:2). Others prefer many encounters during the day. No doubt, the author of Psalm 55 did. He wrote, "***Evening, morning and noon I cry out***" (v. 17).

Bible Study Notes: 9-27-23

How much time should you take? As much as you need. Value quality over length. Your time with God should last long enough for you to say what you want and for God to say what He wants. Which leads us to the second tool you need.

An Open Bible

God speaks to us through His Word. The first step in reading the Bible is to ask God to help you understand it. ***“But the Helper will teach you everything and will cause you to remember all that I told you. This Helper is the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in My name” (John 14:26).***

Before reading the Bible, pray. Don’t go to Scripture looking for your own idea; go searching for God’s. Read the Bible prayerfully. Also, read the Bible carefully. The Bible is not a newspaper to be skimmed but rather a mine to be dig up. ***“Search for it like silver, and hunt for it like hidden treasure. Then you will understand respect for the LORD, and you will find that you know God” (Prov. 2:4-5).***

A Listening Heart

There is a third tool for having a productive time with God. Not only do we need a regular time and an open Bible, we also need ***a listening heart***. We know we are listening to God when what we read in the Bible is what others see in our lives.

Paul urged his readers to put into practice what they had learned from him. ***“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do” (Phil. 4:9).*** If you want to be just like Jesus, let God love you. Spend time listening for Him until you receive your lesson for the day—then apply it.

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

- 1) A regular time and place.***
- 2) An open Bible.***
- 3) An open heart.***

Let God have you, and let God love you—and don’t be surprised if your heart begins to hear God’s voice.

09/27/23

10-4-23 Bible Study Notes

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

Being Led by An Unseen Hand

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 5

“I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me” (John 17:23).

It’s a wonderful day indeed when we stop working for God and begin working with God.

This leads me to a great question. If God is continuously present, is it possible to enjoy unceasing communion with Him? In our last lesson we discussed the importance of setting aside daily time to spend with God. Let’s take the thought a step further. A giant step further. What if our daily communion never ceased? Would it be possible to live—minute by minute—in the presence of God? Is such intimacy even possible? Jesus enjoyed unbroken communion with God. And if we are to be just like Jesus, you and I will strive to do the same.

God’s Translator

Jesus’s relationship with God went far deeper than a daily appointment. Our Savior was always aware of His Father’s presence. Listen to His words:

- ***“The Son can do nothing on His own, but only what He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).***
- ***“I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge” (John 5:30).***
- ***“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me” (John 14:11).***

Clearly, Jesus didn’t act unless He saw His Father act. He didn’t judge until He heard His Father judge. No act or deed occurred without His Father’s guidance. His words have the ring of translator.

10-4-23 Bible Study Notes

When He walked this earth, Jesus was “translating” God all the time. He was so in sync with the Father that He could declare, ***“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me”*** (John 14:11). It was as if He heard a voice other were missing. Because He could hear what others couldn’t, He acted differently than they did.

Remember when everyone was troubled about the man born blind? Jesus wasn’t. Somehow, He knew that the blindness would reveal God’s power (John 9:3). Remember when everyone was worried about Lazarus’s illness? Jesus wasn’t. Rather than hurry to His friend’s bedside, He said, ***“This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God might be glorified thereby”*** (John 11:4). It was as if Jesus could hear what no one else could. A relationship couldn’t be more intimate. Jesus had unbroken communion with His Father.

Do you suppose the Father desires the same for us? Absolutely. Paul says we have been ***“predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son”*** (Rom. 8:29). Let me remind you: God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus. God desires the same abiding intimacy with you that He had with His Son.

Pictures of Intimacy

God draws several pictures to describe the relationship He envisions. One is of a vine and a branch.

John 15:5, 7

God wants to be as close to us as a branch is to a vine. One is an extension of the other. It’s impossible to tell where one starts and the other ends. The branch isn’t connected only at the moment of bearing fruit. The gardener doesn’t keep the branches in a box and then, on the day he wants grapes, glue them to the vine. No, the branch constantly draws nutrition from the vine. Separation means certain death.

God also uses the temple to depict the intimacy He desires. ***“Don’t you know,”*** Paul writes, ***“that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God?”*** (1 Cor. 6:19). Think about the temple for a moment. Was God a visitor or a resident in Solomon’s temple? Would you describe His presence as occasional or permanent? You know the answer. God didn’t come and go, appear and disappear. He was a permanent presence, always available.

That’s good news for us! We are never away from God! He is never away from us— not even for a moment! God doesn’t come to us on Sunday mornings and then exit

10-4-23 Bible Study Notes

on Sunday afternoons. He remains within us, continually present in our lives. Sometimes we go to God with our hurts, but we always go. And as we go, the more we go, the more we become like Him. Paul says we are being changed from ***“glory to glory”*** (2 Cor. 3:18).

There is one last analogy. How about the sheep with the shepherd? Many times, Scripture calls us the flock of God. ***“We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture”*** (Ps. 100:3). We need not know much about sheep to know that the shepherd never leaves the flock. The Good Shepherd never leaves His sheep.

God is as near to you as the vine is to the branch, as present within you as God was in the temple, and as devoted to you as a shepherd to his sheep. Here is how King David described this most intimate of all relationships:

Ps. 139:1-6

David wasn't the only Bible writer to testify to the possibility of a constant sense of God's presence. Paul urges us to never leave the side of our Lord.

- ***“Pray without ceasing”*** (1 Thess. 5:17).
- ***“Be constant in prayer”*** (Rom. 12:12).
- ***“Pray in the Spirit at all times”*** (Eph. 6:18).
- ***“Continue steadfastly in prayer”*** (Col. 4:2).
- ***“In everything, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God”*** (Phil. 4:6).

Does unceasing communion seem complicated? Are you thinking, *Life is difficult enough. Why add this?* If so, remind yourself that God is the burden-remover, not the burden-giver. God reveals that unceasing prayer lighten our load.

Practicing God's Presence

How, then, do I live in God's presence? How do I detect His unseen hand on my shoulder and His voice in my ear? A sheep grows familiar with the voice of the shepherd. How can you and I grow familiar with the voice of God? Here are a few ideas:

10-4-23 Bible Study Notes

Give God your waking thoughts. Before you face the day, face the ‘Father.’ Before you step out of bed, step into His presence. When you roll out of bed onto your knees, begin your day in prayer. Or, with your head still on the pillow and your eyes still closed, offer God the first seconds of your day. Simply say, “Thank you Lord for last night’s rest. I belong to you today.” Here's how the psalmist began his day: **“Every morning, I tell you what I need, and I wait for your answer” (Ps. 5:3).** Which leads to the second idea:

Give God your waiting thoughts. Spend time with Him in silence. Try being silent with God. **“Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10).** Awareness of God is a fruit of stillness before God.

Give God your whispering thoughts. Through the centuries believers have learned the value of brief sentence prayers, prayers that can be whispered anywhere, in any setting. Imagine, every moment as a potential time of communion with God. By giving God your whispering thoughts, the common becomes uncommon. Simple phrases such as “Thank you, Lord,” “You are my resting place, Jesus” can turn a commute into a pilgrimage. Just pray where you are. Give God your whispering thoughts.

And last, give God your fading thoughts. At the end of the day, let your mind settle on Him. Conclude the day as you began it: talking to God. Thank Him for the good parts. Talk to Him about the hard parts. Seek His mercy. Seek His strength. And as you close your eyes, take assurance in the promise: **“He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Ps. 121:4).** If you fall asleep as you pray, don’t worry. What better place to doze off than in the arms of your Father.

10/04/23

10-11-23 Bible Study Notes

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

A Heart Hungry for Worship

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 6

“But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor. 3:18).

People on a plane and people on a pew have a lot in common. All are on a journey. Most are well-behaved and presentable. Some doze, and others gaze out the window. Most, if not all, are satisfied with a predictable experience. For many, the mark of a good worship assembly is the same. “Nice,” we like to say. “It was a nice worship service.” We exit the same way we enter, and we’re happy to return next time.

Overall, we are content to be there. Content to sit and look straight ahead and leave when the worship is over. Content to enjoy an assembly with no surprises or turbulence. Content with a “nice” service. ***“Seek and you will find,”*** Jesus promised. And since a nice worship service is what we seek, a nice worship service is usually what we find.

A few, however, are not content with nice. A few seek more. A few come with childlike excitement. And those few leave wide-eyed with the wonder of having stood in the presence of Jesus Himself. They long for something more. Imagine a child on the plane, are extremely excited because they are looking forward to seeing the pilot.

The same thing happened to Jesus. The day Jesus went to worship, His face was changed. Oh yes, Jesus went to worship. The Bible speaks of a day when Jesus took time to stand with friends in the presence of God.

Matthew 17:1-5

The words of Matthew assume a decision on the part of Jesus to stand in the presence of God. The simple fact that He chose His companions and went up on a mountain suggests this was no spur-of-the-moment action. He didn’t wake up one morning, look at the calendar and then at His watch, and say, “Oops, today is the day we go

10-11-23 Bible Study Notes

to the mountain.” No, He had preparations to make. Ministry to people was suspended so ministry to His heart could occur. Since His chosen place of worship was some distance away, He had to select the right path and stay on the right road. By the time He was on the mountain, His heart was ready. Jesus prepared for worship.

Let me ask you, do you do the same? Do you prepare for worship? What paths do you take to lead you up the mountain? The question may seem foreign, but it could be that many of us simply wake up and show up. We’re sadly casual when it comes to meeting God.

Would you be as lackadaisical with the president? Suppose you were granted a Sunday morning breakfast at the White House? How would you spend Saturday night? Would you get ready? Would you collect your thoughts? Would you think about your questions and requests? I believe you would. Should we prepare any less for an encounter with the Holy God?

Let me urge you to come to worship prepared to worship. Pray before you come so you will be ready to pray when you arrive. Sleep before you come so you’ll stay alert when you arrive. Read the Word before you come so your heart will be soft when you worship. Come hungry. Come willing. Come expecting God to speak. Come asking, even as you walk through the door, “Can I see the pilot today?”

As you do, you will discover the purpose of worship—to change the face of the worshiper. This is exactly what happened to Christ on the mountain. Jesus’ appearance was changed. ***“His face became bright like the sun” (Matt. 17:2).*** The connection between the face and worship is more than coincidental. Our face is the most public part of our bodies, covered less than any other area. It is also the most recognizable part of our bodies. We don’t fill a school annual with pictures of people’s feet but rather with pictures of faces.

God desires to take our faces, this exposed and memorable part of our bodies, and use them to reflect His goodness. Paul writes: ***“Our faces, then, are not covered. We all show the Lord’s glory, and we are being changed to be like Him. This change in us brings ever greater glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).***

God invites us to see His face so He can change ours. He uses our uncovered faces to display His glory. The transformation isn’t easy. But our Lord is up to the task. He loves to change the faces of His children. By His fingers, wrinkles of worry are rubbed away. Shadows of shame and doubt become pictures of grace and trust. He relaxes

10-11-23 Bible Study Notes

clenched jaws and smooths creased brows. His touch can remove the bags of exhaustion from beneath the eyes and turn tears of despair into tears of peace. How? Through worship. We would expect something more complicated, more demanding. A forty-day fast or the memorization of a chapter of the Bible perhaps. No. God's plan is simpler. He changes our faces through worship.

Exactly, what is worship? I like King David's definition. "***O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together***" (Ps. 34:3). Worship is the act of magnifying God. Enlarging our vision of Him. Stepping into the cockpit to see where He sits and observe how He works. Now, His size doesn't change, but our perception of His does. As we draw nearer, He seems larger. That's what we need! A big view of God. Since we have big problems, big worries, and big questions, we need a big view of God.

Worship offers that. How can we sing, "Holy, Holy, Holy" and not have our vision expanded? Or what about the 3rd stanza from the song, "It Is Well with My Soul"? *My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought. My sin—not in part but the whole. Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more. Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!* Can we sing those words and not have our countenance illuminated?

A vibrant, shining face is the mark of one who has stood in God's presence. After speaking to God, Moses had to cover his face with a veil (Ex. 34:33-35). After seeing heaven, Stephen's face glowed like that of an angel (Acts 6:15; 7:55-56). God is in the business of changing the face of the world.

This change is His job, not ours. Our goal is not to make our faces radiant. Not even Jesus did that. Matthew says, "***Jesus' appearance was changed***" not "***Jesus changed His appearance.***" Moses didn't even know his face was shining (Exod. 34:29). Our goal is not to conjure up some fake, frozen expression. Our goal is simply to stand before God with a prepared and willing heart and then let God do His work.

And He does. He wipes away the tears. He mops away the perspiration. He softens our creased brows. He touches our cheeks. He changes our faces as we worship. But there is more. Not only does God change the face of those who worship, he changes those who watch us worship.

Remember the child of the plane, excited about being able to see the pilot? That child stirred the passion in others, they wanted to see the pilot too. The same dynamic occurs when we come to worship with a heart of worship. Paul told the Corinthian church to worship in such a clear way that if an unbeliever entered, "***he would find***

10-11-23 Bible Study Notes

... the secrets of his heart revealed; and . . . would fall down on his face and worship God, declaring that God is indeed among you” (1 Cor. 14:24-25). David cites the power of honest worship: “He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many people will see this and worship Him. Then they will trust the LORD” (Ps. 40:3).

Your heartfelt worship is a missionary appeal. Let unbelievers hear the passion of your voice or see the sincerity in your face, and they may be changed. Peter was. When Peter saw the worship of Jesus, he said, ***“Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you will, let us make three tabernacles, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Matt. 17:4).***

Marks says Peter spoke out of fear (9:6). Luke says Peter spoke out of ignorance (9:33). But whatever the reason, at least Peter spoke. He wanted to do something for God. He didn't understand that God wants hearts and not tabernacles, but at least he was moved to give something. Why? Because he saw the transfigured face of Christ. The same happens in churches today. When people see us giving heartfelt praise to God—when they hear our worship—they are captivated. They want to see the pilot! Sparks from our fire tend to ignite dry hearts.

Seekers may not understand all that happens in a house of worship. They may not understand the meaning of a song or the significance of the communion, but they know joy when they see it. And when they see your face changed, they may want to see God's face.

But wouldn't the opposite be equally true? What happens when a seeker sees boredom on your face? Others are worshipping and you are downcast? Others are in His presence, but you are in your own little world? Others are seeking God's face while you are seeking the face of your wrist watch?

I urge you to be just like Jesus. Prepare your heart for worship. Let God change your face through worship. Demonstrate the power of worship. Above all, seek the face of the pilot. The child did. Because they were looking for the pilot, they left with a changed face. The same can happen to you.

10/11/23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

A Focused Heart

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 7

“Ask the God of our Master, Jesus Christ, the God of glory—to make you intelligent and discerning in knowing Him personally, your eyes focused and clear, so that you can see exactly what it is He is calling you to do” (Eph. 1:17-18 MSG).

The Heart on Target

Life is tough enough as it is. It’s even tougher when we’re headed in the wrong direction. One of the incredible abilities of Jesus was to stay on target. His life never got off track. Not once do we find Him walking down the wrong side of the road. He had no money, no computers, no jets, no administrative assistants or staff, yet Jesus did what many of us fail to do, He kept His life on course.

He could have been a political revolutionary. He could have been a national leader. He could have been content to be a teacher and educate minds or to be a physician and heal bodies. But in the end, He chose to be a Savior and save souls. Anyone near Christ for any length of time heard it from Jesus Himself, ***“For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).***

The heart of Christ was focused on one task. The day He left the carpentry shop of Nazareth He had one ultimate aim—the cross of Calvary. He was so focused that His final words were, ***“It is finished” (John 19:30).*** How could Jesus say He was finished? There were still the hungry to feed, the sick to heal, the untaught to instruct, and the unloved to love. How could He say He was finished? Simple. The job was done. Wouldn’t you love to be able to say the same? Wouldn’t you love to look back on your life and know you had done what you were called to do?

Distracted Hearts

Our lives tend to be so scattered. Lives with no strategy, no goal, no defining priority. Living life with the hiccups. We are easily distracted by the small things and forget the big things. How do we keep from being distracted? God wants us to be just like Jesus and have focused hearts. The one who designed our course left us directions. By answering four simple questions, we can be more like Jesus; we can stay on course with our lives.

Am I Fitting into God's Plan?

“And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). The first step for focusing your heart is to ask this question: Am I fitting into God's plan? God's plan is to save His children from their sins.

If God's goal is the salvation of the world, then our goal should be the same. The details will differ from person to person, but the big picture is identical for all of us. ***“We're Christ's representatives. God uses us to persuade men and women” (2 Cor. 5:20 MSG).*** Regardless of what you don't know about your future, one thing is certain: you are intended to contribute to the good plan of God, to tell others about the God who loves them and desires to bring them home.

But exactly how are you to contribute? What is your specific assignment? Let's look at the answer with a second question.

What Are My Desires?

Maybe you thought your desires/wishes had nothing to do with your life on track. Each of us has been made to serve God in a unique way. ***“We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph. 2:10 NIV).***

You are custom design; you are tailor-made. God prescribed your birth. Regardless of the circumstances that surround your arrival, you are not an accident. God planted you before you were born. The desires of your heart, then, are not secondary; they are critical messages. The wishes of your heart are not to be ignored; they are to be consulted.

God uses your passions to turn your life. God is too gracious to ask you to do something you hate. Be careful now. Don't consider your desires without considering your skills. Move quickly to the third question.

What Are My Abilities?

There are some things we want to do but simply aren't equipped to accomplish. Paul gives good advice in Romans 12:3: ***“Have a stable estimate of your capabilities.”*** In other words, be aware of your strengths. When you teach, do people listen? When you lead, do people follow? When you administer, do things improve? Where are you most productive? Identify your strengths, and then major in them. Take a few irons out of the fire so this one can get hot. Failing to focus on our strengths may prevent us from accomplishing the unique tasks God has called us to do.

A lighthouse keeper who worked on a rocky stretch of coastline received oil once a month to keep his light burning. Not being far from a village, he had frequent guests. One night a woman needed oil to keep her family warm. Another night a father needed oil for his lamp. Then another needed oil to lubricate a wheel. All the requests seemed legitimate, so the lighthouse keeper tried to meet them all. But the end of the month he ran out of oil, and his lighthouse went dark, causing several ships to crash on the coastline. The man was reprimanded by his superiors. They said, “You were given the oil for one reason, to keep the light burning.”

We cannot meet every need in the world. We cannot please every person in the world. We cannot satisfy every request in the world. But some of us try. And in the end, we run out of fuel. Have a sober estimate of your abilities and stick to them. One final question.

Am I Serving God Now?

Again, Jesus is the ideal example. When do we get our first clue that He knows He is the Son of God? In the temple of Jerusalem, He is twelve years old. His parents are three days into the return trip to Nazareth before they notice He is missing. They find Him in the temple studying with the leaders. When they ask Him for an explanation, He says, ***“Did you not know that I must be about My Father’s business” (Luke 2:49).***

As a young boy, Jesus already senses the call of God. But what does He do next? Recruit apostles and preach sermons and perform miracles? No, He goes home to His folks and learns the family business. That is exactly what you should do. Want to bring focus to your life? Do what Jesus did. Go home, love your family, and take care of business. Your first mission field is under your roof. What makes you think they’ll believe you any where else if they don’t believe you under your roof?

I hear you saying, “But I’m ready to do great things for God.” Great, do them at work. Be a good employee. Show up on time with a good attitude. Don’t complain or grumble, but ***“work as if you were doing it for the Lord, not for people” (Col. 3:23).***

God allows you to start fresh at any point in life. ***“From now on, then, you must live the rest of your earthly lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires” (1 Peter 4:2 TEV).*** Circle the words *from now on*. God will give you a fresh start. Regardless of what has controlled you in the past, it’s never too late to get your life on course and be a part of God’s plan.

10/18/23

Bible Study notes for 10-25-23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

An Honest Heart

By Dr. James E. Potts

Presented by Rev. Kenneth Brown

Lesson 8

“Wherefore putting away lying, speak every man truth with his neighbour: for we are members one of another” (Ephesians 4:25) KJV

A woman stands before judge and jury, places one hand on the Bible and the other in the air, and makes a pledge. For the next few minutes, with God as her helper, she will “tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” She is a witness. Her job is not to expand upon nor dilute the truth. Her job is to tell the truth.

Leave it to the legal counsel to interpret. Leave it to the jury to determine. Leave it to the judge to apply. But the witness? The witness speaks the truth. Let her do more or less and she taints the outcome. But let her do that—let her tell the truth—and justice has a chance.

The believer, too, is a witness. We, too, make a pledge. Like the witness in court, we are called to tell the truth. The bench may be absent and the judge unseen, but the Bible is present, the watching world is the jury, and we are the primary witnesses. We are subpoenaed by no less than Jesus Himself: ***“You shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and in every part of the world” (Acts 1:8).***

We are witnesses. And like witnesses in a court, we are called to testify, to tell what we have seen and heard. And we are to speak truthfully. Our job is not to whitewash nor inflate the truth. Our job is to tell the truth. Period.

There is but one difference between the witness in court and the witness for Christ. The witness in court eventually steps down from the witness chair, but the witness for Christ never does. Since the claims of Christ are always on trial, court is in session continuously, and we remain under oath. For the believer, deception is never an option. It wasn't an option for Jesus.

Bible Study notes for 10-25-23

What God Can't Do

One of the most amazing assessments of Christ is this summary: ***“He had done nothing wrong, and He had never lied” (Isa. 53:9)***. Jesus was untiringly honest. His every word accurate, His every sentence true. No cheating on tests. No altering the accounts. Not once did He shade the truth. Not once did He avoid the truth. He simply told the truth. No deceit was found in His mouth.

And if God has His way with us, none will be found in ours. He desires for us to be just like Jesus. His plan, if you remember, is to shape us along the lines of His Son. He seeks not to decrease or minimize our deception but to eliminate our deception. God is blunt about dishonesty: ***“No one who is dishonest will live in my house” (Ps. 101:7)***.

Our Master has a strict honor code. From Genesis to Revelation, the theme is the same. God loves the truth and hates deceit. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Paul lists the type of people who will not inherit the kingdom of God. The picture he paints is a ragged assortment of those who sin sexually, worship idols, take part in adultery, sell their bodies, get drunk, rob people, and—there it is—*lie about others*.

Not telling the truth falls in the same category as anger, adultery and aggravated assault. God views fudging on income taxes the same way He views kneeling before idols.

“The LORD hates those who tell lies but is pleased with those who keep their promises” (Prov. 12:22).

“The LORD hates . . . a lying tongue” (Prov. 6:16-17).

Why? Why the hard line? Why the tough stance? For one reason: dishonesty is absolutely contrary to the character of God. According to Hebrews 6:18, *it is impossible for God to lie*. It's not that God will not lie or that He has chosen not to lie—*He cannot lie*. For God to lie is for a dog to fly and a bird to bark. It simply cannot happen. The Book of Titus echoes the same three words as the Book of Hebrews: ***“God cannot lie” (Titus 1:2)***.

God always speaks truth. When He makes a covenant, He keeps it. When He makes a statement, He means it. And when He proclaims the truth, we can believe it. What He says is true. Even ***“if we are not faithful, [God] will still be faithful, because He cannot be false to Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13)***.

Bible Study notes for 10-25-23

Satan, on the other hand, finds it impossible to tell the truth. According to Jesus, the devil is ***“the father of lies”*** (John 8:44). Remember, deceit was the first tool out of the devil’s bag. In the Garden of Eden, Satan didn’t discourage Eve. He didn’t seduce her. He didn’t sneak up on her. He just lied to her. ***“God says you will die if you eat the fruit? You will not die*** (see Gen. 3:1-4). But Eve was suckered, and the fruit was plucked, and it’s not more than a few paragraphs before husband and son are following suit and the honesty of Eden seems a distant memory.

Maybe the question should not be “Why does God demand such honesty?” but instead “Why do we tolerate such dishonesty?” Never was Jeremiah more the prophet than when he announced: ***“The heart is deceitful above all things”*** (Jer. 17:9 NIV). How do we explain our dishonesty? What’s the reason for our forked tongues and greasy promises? We don’t need a survey to find the answer. *For one thing, we don’t like the truth.* Our view is *You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you squirm.*

Not only do we not like the truth, *we don’t trust the truth.* If we are truly honest, we would have to admit that the truth seems inadequate to do what we need done. We want our bosses to like us, so, we flatter. We call it polishing the apple. God calls it a lie.

We want people to admire us, so, we exaggerate. We call it stretching the truth. God call it a lie. We want people to respect us, so we live in houses we can’t afford and charge bills we can’t pay. We call it the American way. God calls it living a lie.

If We Don’t Tell the Truth

Ananias and Sapphira represent just how much we humans do not trust the truth. They sold a piece of property and gave half the money to the church. They lied to Peter and the apostles, claiming that the land sold for the amount they gave. Their sin was not in holding back some of the money for themselves; it was in misrepresenting the truth. Their deceit resulted in their deaths.

Luke writes: ***“The whole church and all the others who heard about these things were filled with fear”*** (Acts 5:11). The wages of deceit is still death. Not death of the body, but the death of:

- *A marriage*—Falsehoods are termites in the trunk of the family tree.
- *A conscience*—The tragedy of the second lie is that it is always easier to tell than the first.

Bible Study notes for 10-25-23

- *A career*—Just ask the student who got booted out for cheating or the employee who got fired for embezzlement if the lie wasn't fatal.
- *Faith*—The language of faith and the language of falsehood have two different vocabularies. Those fluent in the language of falsehood find terms like *confession* and *repentance* hard to pronounce.

We could also list the deaths of intimacy, trust, peace, credibility, and self-respect. But perhaps the most tragic death that occurs from deceit is our witness. The court won't listen to the testimony of a perjured/lying witness. Neither will the world. Even more significantly, do we think God will use us as a witness if we won't tell the truth?

Every high school football team has a player whose assignment is to carry the play from the coach to the huddle. What if the player doesn't tell the truth? What if the coach calls for a pass but the courier says the coach called for a run? One thing is certain: the coach won't call on that player very long. God says if we are faithful with the small things, He will trust us with the greater things (Matt. 25:21). Can He trust you with the small things?

The cure for deceit is simply this: tell the truth. The question to ask is, will God bless my deceit? Will He, who hates lies, bless a strategy built on lies? Will the Lord, who loves the truth, bless the business of falsehoods? Will God come to the aid of the cheater? Will God bless my dishonesty?

Do you tell the truth—always? If not, start today. Don't wait until tomorrow. The ripple of today's lie is tomorrow's wave and next year's flood. Start today. Be just like Jesus. Tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

10/25/23

11-1-23 Bible Study Notes

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

A Pure Heart

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 9

“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” (1 Peter 5:8-9).

Everybody knows you harvest what you sow. You reap what you plant. Yet, what we know when we develop land, we tend to forget when we cultivate our hearts. Think for a moment of your heart as a greenhouse. A greenhouse is perfectly suited for growing. And your heart, like a greenhouse, has to be managed.

Consider for a moment your thoughts as seed. Some thoughts become flowers. Others become weeds. Sow seeds of hope and enjoy optimism. Sow seeds of doubt and expect insecurity. ***“People harvest only what they plant” (Gal. 6:7).*** The proof is everywhere you look. Ever wonder why some people have the Teflon capacity to resist negativism and remain patient, optimistic, and forgiving? Could it be that they have diligently sown seeds of goodness and are enjoying the harvest? Ever wonder why others have such a sour outlook? Such a gloomy attitude? You would, too, if your heart were a greenhouse of weeds and thorns.

If the heart is a greenhouse and our thoughts are seeds, shouldn't we be careful about what we sow? Shouldn't we be selective about the seeds we allow to come into the greenhouse? Shouldn't there be a guard at the door? Isn't guarding the heart a planned task? ***“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Prov. 4:23 NIV).*** Or another translation reads: ***“Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life.”***

Let's test this principle. Two drivers are stuck in the same traffic jam. One person fumes in anger, thinking, *“My schedule is messed up.* The other sighs in relief, *“Good time to slow down.”* Two mothers face the same tragedy. One is destroyed: *“I'll never get over this.”* The other is sad but determined: *“God will get me through.”* Two managers face the same success. One pats himself on the back and grows cocky. The other gives the credit to God and grows grateful.

11-1-23 Bible Study Notes

You have to admit some of our hearts are messy. Let any riffraff knock on the door, and we throw it open. Anger shows up, and we let him in. Revenge needs a place to stay, so we have him pull up a chair. Pity wants to have a party, so, we show him the kitchen.

For most of us, thought management never crosses our minds. We think about time management, weight management, and personnel management. But what about thought management? Shouldn't we be as concerned about managing our thoughts as we are managing everything else? Jesus was. Like a trained soldier at the gate of a city, He stood watch over His mind. He guarded the gateway of His heart. Many thoughts were denied entrance.

Need a few examples? On one occasion the people determined to make Jesus their king. Most of us would delight in the notion of royalty. Even if we refused the crown, we would enjoy considering the invitation. Not Jesus. ***“Jesus saw that in their excitement, they were about to grab Him and make Him king, so, He slipped off and went back up the mountain by Himself”*** (John 6:15 MSG).

Another example occurred in a conversation Jesus had with Peter. Upon hearing Jesus announce His impending death on the cross, the hotheaded apostle objected. ***“Impossible, Master! That can never be!”*** (Matt.16:22 MSG). It appears that Peter was about to question the necessity of Calvary. But He never had a chance. Christ blocked the doorway. He sent both the messenger and the author of the opposition running: ***“Peter, get out of my way, Satan, get lost. You have no idea how God works”*** (Matt. 16:23 MSG).

And how about the time Jesus was mocked? Have you ever had people laugh at you? Jesus did too. Responding to an appeal to heal a sick girl, He entered her house only to be told she was dead. His response? ***“The child is not dead but sleeping.”*** The response of the people in the house? ***“They laughed at Him.”*** Just like all of us, Jesus had to face a moment of humiliation. But unlike most of us, He refused to receive it. Notice His response: ***“He put them all outside”*** (Mark 5:39-40 RSV). The mockery was not allowed in the house of the girl nor in the mind of Christ.

Jesus guarded His heart. If He did, shouldn't we do the same? Most definitely! ***“Be careful what you think, because your thoughts run your life”*** (Prov. 4:23). Jesus wants your heart to be fertile and fruitful. He wants you to have a heart like His. That is God's goal for you. He wants you to ***“think and act like Christ Jesus”*** (Phil. 2:5). But how? The answer is simple. We can be transformed if we make one decision: *I will submit my thoughts to the authority of Jesus.*

11-1-23 Bible Study Notes

At the conclusion of Matthew's gospel, it's easy to overlook a significant claim made by Christ. ***"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me"*** (Matt. 28:18 NIV). Jesus claims to be the CEO of heaven and earth. He has ultimate say on everything, especially our thoughts. He has more authority, for example, than your parents. Your parents may say you are no good, but Jesus says you are valuable, and He has authority over parents. He even has more authority over you than you do. You may tell yourself that you are too bad to be forgiven, but Jesus has a different opinion. If you give Him authority over you, then your guilty thoughts are no longer allowed.

Jesus also has authority over your ideas. Suppose you have the idea that you want to rob a grocery store. If you have given Him authority over your ideas, then the idea of stealing cannot remain in your thoughts. To have a pure heart, we must submit all thoughts to the authority of Christ. If we are willing to do that, He will change us to be like Him.

Let's return to the image of the greenhouse. Your heart is a fertile greenhouse ready to produce good fruit. Your mind is the doorway to your heart—the place where you determine which seeds are sown and which seeds are rejected. The Holy Spirit is ready to help you manage and filter the thoughts that try to enter. He can help you guard your heart.

He stands with you on the threshold. A thought approaches, a questionable thought. Do you throw open the door and let it enter? No, you don't. You ***"fight to capture every thought until it acknowledges the authority of Christ"*** (2 Cor. 10:5). You don't leave the door unguarded. You stand equipped with handcuffs and leg irons, ready to capture any thought not fit to enter.

The ordinary person would throw open the door and let the thought in. Like a seed from a weed, it would find fertile soil and take root and bear thorns of inferiority. But as a believer, you aren't your average person. You are led by the Spirit. So, rather than let the thought in, you take it captive. You handcuff it and march it down the street to the courthouse where you present the thought before the judgment seat of Christ. You are submitting the thought to the authority of Jesus. If Jesus agrees with the thought, then let it in. If not, kick it out. In this case Jesus disagrees.

How do you know if Jesus agrees or disagrees? You open your Bible. What does God think about you? ***"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do"*** (Eph. 2:10 NIV).

11-1-23 Bible Study Notes

And *“There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (Rom. 8:1 NIV).

You guard your heart. You walk in the Spirit. And you take every thought captive, as you pull out the sword of the Spirit, His Word. Now armed with the opinion of Christ and the sword of the Spirit, what do you do?

The point is this. Guard the doorway of your heart. Submit your thoughts to the authority of Christ. The more selective you are about the seeds, the more delighted you will be with the crop.

11/01/23

Bible Study Notes: 11-8-23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

A Hope-Filled Heart

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 10

***“Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times”
(Romans 12:12 TEV).***

William Rathje, a Harvard-educated researcher is convinced we can learn a lot from the trash dumps of the world. Rathje examines trash to study society. His organization is called the Garbage Project. He is able to find meaning in our garbage. He has learned a lot by looking at our garbage

What if we learned to do the same? What if we changed the way we view the garbage that comes our way? On Rathje’s office wall is a framed headline he found in a newspaper: “Gold in Garbage.” This garbologist finds treasure in trash. Jesus did the same. What everyone else saw as disaster, He saw as opportunity. And because He saw what others didn’t, He found what others missed. Early in His ministry Jesus said this about our vision:

Matthew 6:22-23

In other words, how we look at life determines how we live life. But Jesus did much more than talk this principle, He modeled it.

The Darkest Night in History

On the night before His death, a landfill of troubles fell in on Jesus. Somewhere between the Gethsemane prayer and the mock trial is what has to be the darkest scene in the history of the human drama. Even though the entire episode couldn’t have totaled more than five minutes, the event had enough badness to fill a thousand dumpsters.

Except for Christ, not one person did one good thing. If you look for an ounce of courage or a speck of character, you won’t find it. What you will find is lot of deceit and betrayal. Yet, in it all, Jesus saw reason to hope. Read Matt. 26:46-56.

If a reporter had been assigned to cover the arrest, his headline might have read:

Bible Study Notes: 11-8-23

A Dark Night for Jesus—Galilean Preacher Abandoned by Friends

Last Friday they welcomed Him with palm leaves. Last night they arrested Him with swords. The world of Jesus of Nazareth turned sour as He was apprehended by a crowd of soldiers and angry citizens in a garden just outside the city walls. Only a week since His triumphant entry, His popularity had taken a fatal plunge.

Even His followers refuse to claim Him. The disciples who took pride in being seen with Him earlier in the week ran from Him last night. With the public crying for His death and the disciples denying and involvement, the future of this celebrated teacher appears bleak, and impact of His mission appears limited.

The darkest night of Jesus' life was marked by one crisis after another. In just a moment we will see what Jesus saw, but first let's consider what an observer would have witnessed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

First, He would have seen *unanswered prayer*. Jesus had just offered an anguished appeal to God. ***“My Father, if it is possible, do not give me this cup of suffering. But do what you want, not what I want” (26:39).*** This was no calm, quiet hour of prayer. Matthew says that Jesus was ***“very sad and troubled” (26:37).*** The Master ***“fell to the ground” (26:39)*** and cried out to God. Luke tells us that Jesus was ***“full of pain”*** and that ***“His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground” (Luke 22:44).***

Never has earth offered such an urgent request. And never had heaven offered more deafening silence. The prayer of Jesus was unanswered. *Jesus and unanswered prayer* in the same phrase, is unimaginable. Would God, the one who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, keep something from His own Son? He did that night. As a result, Jesus had to deal with the dilemma of unanswered prayer. And that was just the beginning. Looked who showed up next.

Judas arrived with an angry crowd. Again, from the perspective of an observer, this crowd represents another crisis. Not only did Jesus have to face unanswered prayer, He also had to deal with *unfruitful service*. The very people He came to save had now come to arrest Him. He came to the aid of so many. All those sermons. All those miracles. Not one person speaks out on His behalf. The people He came to save have turned against Him.

We can almost forgive the crowd. Their contact with Jesus was too brief, too casual. Maybe they didn't know better. But the disciples did. They knew better. They knew *Him* better. But do they defend Jesus? Hardly. The most bitter pill Jesus had to

Bible Study Notes: 11-8-23

swallow was the *unbelievable betrayal* by the disciples. Judas wasn't the only turn-coat. Matthew is quite honest when he confesses, "*All of Jesus' followers left Him and ran away*" (26:56).

From the outside looking in, all we see is betrayal. The disciples have left Him. The people have rejected Him. And God hasn't heard Him. Never has so much trash been dumped on one being. From a human point of view, Jesus' world has collapsed. No answer from heaven, no help from the people, no loyalty from His friends.

Jesus, neck deep in rubbish. That's how I would have described the scene. That's how a reporter would have described it. That's how a witness would have pictured it. But that's not how Jesus saw it. He saw something else totally. He wasn't oblivious to the trash; He just wasn't limited to it. Somehow He was able to see good in the bad, the purpose in the pain, and God's presence in the problem.

We could use a little of Jesus' 20/20 vision. You and I live in a trashy world. Unwanted garbage comes our way on a regular basis. We, too, have unanswered prayers and unfruitful dreams and unbelievable betrayals. We've been handed a trash sack of mishaps and heartaches. Sure you have. May I ask, what are you going to do with it?

Seeing What Jesus Sees

You have several options. You could hide it. You could take the trash bag and cram it under your coat or stick it under your dress and pretend it isn't there. But you and I know you won't fool anyone. Besides, sooner or later it will start to stink. Or you could disguise it. Paint it green, put it on the front lawn, and tell everybody it is a tree. Again, no one will be fooled, and pretty soon it's going to smell.

So, what will you do? If you follow the example of Christ, you will learn to see tough times differently. Remember, God loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to have a hope-filled heart . . . just like Jesus. Here is what Christ did.

He found good in the bad. It would be hard to find someone worse than Judas. Some say he was a good man with a backfired strategy. I don't buy that. The Bible says, "*Judas . . . was a thief. He was the one who kept the money box, and he often stole from it*" (John 12:6). The man was a crook. Somehow, he was able to live in the presence of God and experience the miracles of Christ and remain unchanged. In the end he decided he would rather have money than a friend, so, he sold Jesus for thirty

Bible Study Notes: 11-8-23

pieces of silver. Judas was thief and a crook. How could anyone see him any other way?

I don't know, but Jesus did. Only inches from the face of his betrayer, Jesus looked at him and said, "***Friend, do what you came to do***" (Matt. 26:50). What Jesus saw in Judas as worthy of being called a friend, I can't imagine. But I do know that Jesus doesn't lie, and in that moment, He saw something good in a very bad man.

Again, Jesus gives us guidance as to how we can do the same. He didn't place all the blame on Judas. He saw another presence that night: "***this is . . . the time when darkness rules***" (Luke 22:53). In no way was Judas innocent, but neither was Judas acting alone. Your attackers aren't acting alone either. "***Our fight is not against people on earth but against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world***" (Eph. 6:12).

Those who betray us are victims of a fallen world. We need not place all the blame on them. Jesus found enough good in the face of Judas to call him friend, and He can help us do the same with those who hurt us. Not only did Jesus find good in the bad, *He found purpose in the pain*. Of the ninety-eight words Jesus spoke at His arrest, thirty refer to the purpose of God. "***It must happen this way to bring about what Scriptures say***" (Matt. 26:54). "***All these things have happened so that it will come about as the prophets wrote***" (v. 56).

Jesus chose to see His immediate struggle as a necessary part of a greater plan. He viewed the Gethsemane conflict as an important but singular act in the grand manuscript of God's drama.

God never promises to remove us from our struggles. But He does promise to change the way we look at them. The apostle Paul dedicates a paragraph to listing trash bags: troubles, problems, sufferings, hunger, nakedness, danger, and violent death. These are the very Dumpsters of difficulty we hope to escape.

Romans 8:35-37

But Paul says "*in*" all these things. The solution is not to avoid trouble but to change the way we see our troubles. He can correct your vision.

Bible Study Notes for 11-15-23

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

When Heaven Celebrates

*By Dr. James E. Potts
Presented by Rev. Kenneth Brown*

Lesson 11

“O sing unto the LORD a new song: sing unto the LORD, all the earth. Sing unto the LORD, bless His name; shew forth His salvation from day to day” (Psalm 96:1-2).

“. . . rejoice because your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20b).

A Rejoicing Heart

In one of the greatest chapters in the Bible, Luke 15, tells three stories. Each story speaks of something lost and something found. A lost sheep. A lost coin. And a lost son. And at the end of each one, Jesus describes a party, a celebration. The shepherd throws the party for the lost-now-found sheep. The housewife throws a party because of the lost-now-found coin. And the father throws a party in honor of his lost-now-found son.

These parables, each with a party. Three stories, each with the appearance of the same word: *happy*. Regarding the shepherd who found the lost sheep, Jesus says: ***“And when he finds it, he ‘happily’ puts it on his shoulders and goes home” (5-6, underline’s mine).*** When the housewife finds her lost coin, she announces, ***“Be ‘happy’ with me because I have found the coin that I lost” (v. 9, underline’s mine).*** And the father of the prodigal son explains to the reluctant older brother, ***“We had to celebrate and be ‘happy’ because your brother was dead, but now he is found” (v. 32, underline’s mine).***

The point is clear. Jesus is happiest when the lost are found. For Him, no moment compares to the moment of salvation. ***“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God when one sinner changes his heart and life” (v. 10).***

How do we explain such joy? Why such excitement? You have to admit the excitement is a bit curious. We aren’t talking about a nation of people or even a city of souls; we’re talking about joy ***“when one sinner changes his heart and life.”*** How could one person create that much excitement?

Bible Study Notes for 11-15-23

Who would imagine that our actions have such an impact on heaven? We can live and die and leave no more than an obituary. Our greatest actions on earth go mostly unnoticed and unrecorded. But let a sinner repent, and every other activity ceases, and every heavenly being celebrates.

Heaven throws no party over our other achievements. When we graduate from school or open our business or have a baby, as far as we know, the celestial or heavenly bubbly stays in the refrigerator. Why the big deal over conversion?

We don't always share such excitement. When we hear of a soul saved, do we drop everything and celebrate? Is your good day made better? Why do Jesus and His angels rejoice over one repenting sinner? Can they see something we can't? Do they know something we don't?

Absolutely. They know what heaven holds, and they can't wait to see your face when you arrive. Better still, they can't wait to see you. When you arrive and enter the celebration, something wonderful will happen. A final transformation will occur. You will be just like Jesus. ***"We have not yet been shown what we will be in the future. But we know that when Christ comes again, we will be like Him"*** (1 John 3:2).

Of all the blessings of heaven, one of the greatest will be you! You will be God's work of art. God's work will be completed. At last, you will have a heart like His. You will love with a perfect love. You will worship with a radiant face. You will hear each word God speaks. Your heart will be pure, your words will be like jewels, your thoughts will be like treasures. You will be just like Jesus. You will, at last, have a heart like His.

And if that were not enough, everyone else will be like Him as well. Heaven is populated by those who let God change them. Arguments will cease, for jealousy won't exist. Suspensions won't surface, for there will be no secrets. Every sin is gone. Every insecurity is forgotten. Every fear is past. Pure wheat. No weeds. Pure gold. No alloy. Pure love. No lust. Pure hope. No fear. No wonder the angels rejoice when one sinner repents; they know another work of art will soon grace the gallery of God. They know what heaven holds.

There is yet another reason for the celebration. Part of the excitement is from our arrival. The other part is from our deliverance. Jesus rejoices that we are headed to heaven, but He equally rejoices that we are saved from hell.

Bible Study Notes for 11-15-23

What We're Saved From

One phrase summarizes the horror of hell. "God isn't there." Think for a moment about this question: What if God weren't here on earth? You think people can be cruel now, imagine us without the presence of God. You think we are brutal to each other now, imagine the world without the Holy Spirit.

You think there is loneliness and despair and guilt now, imagine life without the touch of Jesus. No forgiveness. No hope. No acts of kindness. No words of love. No more food given in His name. No more deeds done in His honor. If God took away His angels, His grace, His promise of eternity, and His servants, what would the world be like?

In a word, hell. No one to comfort you and no music to soothe you. A world where poets don't write of love and musicians don't sing of hope, for love and hope were passengers on the last ship. The final vessel has departed, and the anthem of hell is only two words: "if only."

According to Jesus hell knows only one sound, the "*weeping and gnashing of teeth*" (**Matt. 22:13**). From hell comes a sad, sorrowful, unending moan as its inhabitants realize the opportunity they have missed. What they would give for one more chance. But that chance is gone. "*And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment*" (**Heb. 9:27**).

Can you see now why angels rejoice when one sinner repents? Jesus knows what awaits the saved. He also knows what awaits the condemned. How can our hearts be changed so we rejoice like Jesus rejoices?

Ask God to help you have His eternal view of the world. His view of humanity is frankly simple. From His perspective every person is either:

- Entering through the small gate or the wide gate (Matt. 7:13-14).
- Traveling the narrow road or the wide road (Matt. 7:13-14).
- Building on rock or sand (Matt. 7:24-27).
- Wise or foolish (Matt. 25:2).
- Prepared or unprepared (Matt. 24:45-51).
- Fruitful or fruitless (Matt. 25:14-27).
- Heaven called or hell bound (Mark 16:15-16).

Bible Study Notes for 11-15-23

To have heart like Jesus is to look into the faces of the saved and rejoice! They are just one grave away from being just like Jesus. To have a heart like His is to look into the faces of the lost and pray. For unless they turn, they are one grave away from torment.

And so, my challenge to you is simple. Ask God to help you have His eternal view of the world.

11/15/23

11-29-23 Bible Study Notes

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

Finishing Strong

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 12

“Let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (KJV).

“Let us run the race that is before us and never give up” MSG (Hebrew 12:1c).

The word *race* is from the Greek *agon*, from which we get the word *agony*. The Christian’s race is not a jog but rather a demanding and grueling, sometimes agonizing race. It takes a huge effort to finish strong.

You’ve noticed that many don’t. We’ve seen many on the side of the trail. They used to be running. There was a time when they kept the pace. But then weariness set in. They didn’t think the run would be this tough. Or even were discouraged by a bump and intimidated by a fellow runner. Whatever the reason, they don’t run anymore. They may be believers. They may come to church. They may put money in the offering and warm the pew, but their hearts aren’t in the race. They retired before their time. Unless something changes, their best work will have been their first work, and they will finish with a whine.

When we look at Jesus, His best work was His final work, and His strongest step was His last step. Our Master is the classic example of one who endured. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say that Jesus ***“held on while wicked people were doing evil things to Him” (v. 3)***. The Bible says Jesus “held on,” implying that Jesus could have “let go.” The runner could have given up, sat down, gone home. He could have quit the race. But He didn’t. *“He held on while wicked people were doing evil things to Him.”*

Have you ever thought about the evil things done to Christ? Can you think of the times when Jesus could have given up? How about His time of temptation? You and I know what it is like to endure a moment of temptation or an hour of temptation, even a day of temptation. But *forty* days? That is what Jesus faced. ***“The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness where the devil tempted Jesus for forty days” (Luke 4:1-2)***.

11-29-23 Bible Study Notes

We imagine the wilderness temptation as three isolated events scattered over a forty-day period. In reality, Jesus' time of testing was nonstop; ***“the devil tempted Jesus for forty days.”*** Satan got on Jesus like a shirt and refused to leave. Every step, whispering in His ear. Every turn of the path, sowing doubt. Was Jesus impacted by the devil? Apparently so. Luke doesn't say that Satan *tried* to tempt Jesus. This verse doesn't read, the devil *attempted* to tempt Jesus.

No, the passage is clear: ***“the devil tempted Jesus.”*** Jesus was *tempted*, He was *tested*. Tempted to change sides? Tempted to go home? Tempted to settle for a kingdom on earth? I don't know, but I know He was tempted. A war raged within. Stress stormed without. And since He was tempted, He could have quit the race. But He didn't. He kept on running.

Temptation didn't stop Him, nor did accusations. Can you imagine what it would be like to run in a race and be criticized by the onlookers? His own family called Him a lunatic. His neighbors treated Him even worse. When Jesus returned to His hometown, they tried to throw Him off a cliff (Luke 4:29). But Jesus didn't quit running. Temptations didn't discourage Him. Accusations didn't defeat Him. Nor did shame depress Him.

Shame is a feeling of disgrace, embarrassment, humiliation. That is exactly what Jesus felt. Why? You ask. *He never did anything worthy of shame.* No, but we did. And since on the cross God made Him become sin (2 Cor. 5:21), Jesus was covered with shame. He was shamed before His family. Stripped naked before His own mother and loved ones.

Shamed before His fellow men. Forced to carry a cross until the weight caused Him to stumble. Shamed before His church. The pastors and elders of His day mocked Him, calling Him names. Shamed before the city of Jerusalem. Condemned to die a criminal's death. Parents, no doubt, pointed to Him from a distance and told their children, “That's what they do to evil men.”

But the shame before men didn't compare with the shame Jesus felt before His Father. Our individual shame seems too much to bear. Can you imagine bearing all the shame of all humanity? One wave of shame after another was dumped on Jesus. Though He never cheated, He was convicted as a cheat. Though He never stole, heaven regarded Him as a thief. Though He never lied, He was considered a liar. Though He never lusted, He bore the shame of an adulterer. Though He always believed, He endured the disgrace of an unbeliever.

11-29-23 Bible Study Notes

How did He endure such disgrace? What gave Jesus the strength to endure the shame of all the world? Like Jesus we are tempted. Like Jesus we are accused. Like Jesus we are ashamed. But unlike Jesus, we give up. We give out. We sit down. How can we keep running as Jesus did? How can our hearts have the endurance Jesus had?

By focusing where Jesus focused: on ***“the joy that God put before Him”*** (Heb. 12:2). This verse may very well be the greatest testimony ever written about the glory of heaven. Nothing is said about golden streets or angels’ wings. No reference is made to music or feasts. Even the word *heaven* is missing from the verse. But though the word is missing, the power is not.

Keep in mind that, heaven was not foreign to Jesus. He is the only person to live on earth *after* He had lived in heaven. As believers, you and I will live in heaven after time on earth, but Jesus did just the opposite. He knew heaven before He came to earth. He knew what awaited Him upon His return. And knowing what awaited Him in heaven enabled Him to bear the shame on earth.

He ***“accepted the shame as if it were nothing because of the joy that God put before Him”*** (Heb. 12:2). In His final moments, Jesus focused on the joy God put before Him. He focused on the prize of heaven. By focusing on the prize, He was able not only to finish the race but to finish it strong.

We too must keep our eyes on the prize of heaven, enduring in faith and fixing our eyes on Jesus. In an hour that has no end, we will hear these words: ***“Well done, good and faithful servant”*** (Matt. 25:23).

11/29/2023

HAVING A HEART LIKE JESUS

Fixing Your Eyes on Jesus

By Dr. James E. Potts

Lesson 13

“May He enlightened the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope His call holds for you, what rich glories He has promised the saints will inherit” (Eph. 1:18).

There are times when we see. And then there are times when we *see*. There are times when we observe, and there are times when we memorize. There are times when we notice, and there are times when we study. Most of us know what it means to see something new, but do we know what it’s like to see Jesus? Do we know what it’s like to ***“fix our eyes on Jesus”*** (Heb. 12:2 NIV)?

We have spent the last twelve lessons looking at what it means to be just like Jesus, to have a heart just like Jesus. The world has never known a heart so pure, a character so flawless. His spiritual hearing was so keen He never missed a heavenly whisper. His mercy so abundant He never missed a chance to forgive. No lie left His lips, no distraction marred His vision. He touched when others pulled back. He endured when others quit.

Jesus is the ultimate model for every person. And what we have done in these lessons is exactly what God invites you to do with the rest of your life. He urges you to fix your eyes upon Jesus. Heaven invites you to set the lens of your heart on the heart of the Savior and make Him the object of your life. For that reason, I want to conclude this series with this question: What does it mean to *see* Jesus?

The Shepherds can tell us. For them it wasn’t enough to see the angels. You would think it would have been. Night sky shattered with light. Stillness breaking out in song. Simple shepherds waken from their sleep and raise to their feet by a choir of angels: ***“Glory to God in the highest!”*** Never had these men seen such splendor.

But it wasn’t enough to see the angels. The shepherds wanted to see the one who sent the angels. Since they would not be satisfied until they saw Him, you can trace the long line of Jesus-seekers to a person of the pasture who said, ***“Let’s go. . . Let’s see”*** (Luke 2:15).

Not far behind the shepherds was a man named Simeon. Luke tells us Simeon was a good man who served in the temple during the time of Christ's birth. Luke also tells us, "*Simeon had been told by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he saw the Christ promised by the Lord*" (Luke 2:26). This prophesy was fulfilled only a few days after the shepherds saw Jesus.

Somehow Simeon knew that the blanketed bundle he saw in Mary's arms was the Almighty God. And for Simeon, seeing Jesus was enough. Now he was ready to die. Some don't want to die until they have seen the world. Simeon's dream was not so timid. He didn't want to die until he had seen the maker of the world. He had to see Jesus. He prayed: "*God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I've seen your salvation*" (Luke 2:29-30).

The Magi had the same desire. Like Simeon, they wanted to see Jesus. Like the shepherds, they were not satisfied with what they saw in the night sky. Not that the star wasn't spectacular. Not that the star wasn't historical. To be a witness of the star wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to see the Light over Bethlehem; they had to see the Lights of Bethlehem. It was Him they came to see.

And they succeeded! They all succeeded. More remarkable than their desire to see Jesus, Jesus wanted to be seen! Whether they came from the pasture or the palace, whether they lived in the temple or among the sheep, whether their gift was gold or honest surprise, they were welcomed. Search for one example of one person who wanted to see the infant Jesus and was turned away. You won't find it.

The *examples* continue. Consider John and Andrew. They, too, were rewarded. For them it wasn't enough to listen to John the Baptist. Most would have been content to serve in the shadow of the world's most famous preacher. And when John and Andrew saw Him they left John the Baptist to follow Jesus.

Note the request they made. "*Rabbi,*" they asked, "*where are you staying?*" (John 1:38). They didn't ask Jesus to give them a minute or an opinion or a message or a miracle. They asked for His address. They wanted to hang out with Him. They wanted to know Him. They wanted to know what caused His head to turn and His heart to burn and His soul to yearn. They wanted to study His eyes and follow His steps. They wanted to see Him. They wanted to know what made Him laugh and if He ever got tired. And most of all, they wanted to know, *Could Jesus be who John said He was—and if He is, what on earth is God doing on earth?* You can't answer such a question by talking to His cousin; you have to talk to the man Himself.

Jesus' answer to the disciples? ***“Come and see”*** (v. 39). He didn't say, ***“Come and glance,”*** or ***“Come and peek.”*** He said, ***“Come and see.”*** This is no time for side glances or occasional peeks. ***“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith”*** (Heb. 12:2 NIV). The fisherman fixes his eyes on the boat. The girl fixes her eyes on the boy. The disciples fixes his eyes on the Savior.

That's what Matthew did, if you remember, was converted at work. According to his resume', he was a tax consultant for the government. According to his neighbors, he was a crook. He kept a tax booth at the street corner. That's where he was the day, he saw Jesus. ***“Follow me,”*** the Master said, and Matthew did. And in the very next verse we find Jesus sitting at Matthew's dining room table. ***“Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house”*** (Matt. 9:10).

A curbside conversation could not have satisfied his heart, so Matthew took Jesus home. Something happens over a dinner table that doesn't happen over an office desk. Didn't matter to Jesus that Matthew was a thief. Didn't matter to Jesus that Matthew had built a split-level house with the proceeds of extortion. What did matter was that Matthew wanted to see Jesus, and since God ***“rewards those who truly want to find Him”*** (Heb. 11:6), Matthew was rewarded with the presence of Christ in his home.

Zacchaeus couldn't see over the crowd that lined the street the day Jesus came to Jericho. He like Matthew, had a hunger in his heart to see Jesus. It wasn't enough to stand at the back of the crowd. It wasn't enough to peep through a cardboard telescope. It wasn't enough to listen to someone else describe the parade of the Messiah. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus with his own eyes. So, he went out on a limb, shim-mied up a tree in hopes of seeing Christ.

I wonder if you would be willing to do the same. Would you go out on a limb to see Jesus? Not everyone would. In the same Bible where we read about Zacchaeus crawling across the limb, we read about a young ruler. Unlike Zacchaeus, the crowd made room for him. Upon learning that Jesus was in the area, he called for the limo and cruised across town and approached the carpenter. Notice the question he had for Jesus: ***“Teacher, what good thing must I do to have life forever?”*** (Matt. 19:16).

Bottom line sort of fellow, this ruler. No time for formalities or conversations. ***“Let's get right to the issue. Your schedule is busy; so is mine. Tell me how I can get saved, and I'll leave you alone.”*** There was nothing wrong with his question, but there was a problem with his heart.

Compare his desire with that of Zacchaeus, “Can I make it up that tree?” Or John and Andrew, “Where are you staying?” Or Matthew, “Can you spend the evening?” Or Simeon, “Can I stay alive until I see Him?” Or the Magi, “Saddle up the camels. We aren’t stopping until we find Him.” Or the shepherds, “Let’s go—Let’s see.”

See the difference? The rich young ruler wanted medicine. The others wanted the Physician. The ruler wanted an answer to the question. They wanted the Teacher. He was in a hurry. They had all the time in the world. He settled for a cup of coffee at the drive-through window. They wouldn’t settle for anything less than a full-course meal at the banquet table. They wanted more than salvation. They wanted the Savior. They wanted to see Jesus.

“He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). Diligently. Don’t be satisfied with angels. Don’t be content with stars in the sky. Seek Him out as the shepherds did. Long for Him as Simeon did. Do as John and Andrew did: ask for His address. Do as Matthew: invite Jesus into your house. Imitate Zacchaeus. Risk whatever it takes to see Christ.

God rewards those who seek Him. Not those who seek doctrine or religion or systems or creeds. Many settle for these lesser passions, but the reward goes to those who settle for nothing less than Jesus Himself. And what is the reward? What awaits those who seek Jesus? Nothing short of the heart of Jesus. ***“And as the Spirit of the Lord works within us, we become more and more like Him” (2 Cor. 3:18 TLB).***

Can you think of a greater gift than to be like Jesus? Christ felt no guilt; God wants to banish yours. Jesus had no bad habits; God wants to remove yours. Jesus had no fear of death; God wants you to be fearless. Jesus had kindness for the disabled and mercy for the rebellious and courage for the challenges. God wants you to have the same.

He loves you just the way you are, but He refuses to leave you that way. He wants you to be just like Jesus.

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LIVING THE RESURRECTION

John 21:2-7a, 11b

We are often plagued by the sense that there is not enough to go around—not enough of what we believe to be important parts of our lives. We are uneasy that there may not be enough money, time, resources, energy, talent—you name it, and we fear a shortage of it.

We have just discussed fear. This sense of shortage is on the theme of fear and anxiety. Our awareness that we live in scarcity is a specific form of fear, a fear that challenges us to ponder why we believe we don't have what we need.

We are painfully aware that all things come to an end. People simply run out of life. Beneath all of our fears about scarcity is the brutal reality of death and decay. We are frightened and anxiety ridden by a low-level and persistent buzz of death that always sounds in the background. There is not enough of life itself to go around.

So here is where we stand. In the lives of many people, families, and churches, we look at what we have and at what we need and come to the fearful conclusion that we may not be able to make ends meet.

The gospel according to John narrates a resurrection story that is quite profound. That charismatic teacher and miracle worker Jesus had died and been buried. This turn of events stunned the inner circle of Jesus' followers, the apostles; they had in a real way bet their lives on this man. Further, there had been reports and events that suggested Jesus had been raised from the dead.

The idea of resurrection did not enter their minds. That's why the apostles seem to be able to walk away from these strange reports. They just knew that their great vision had peaked out when the stone had been rolled over the entrance to Jesus' tomb. So, they decide to return home to Galilee.

Peter says, "*I'm going fishing.*" If they were going fishing, that meant that they were returning to their old, pre-Jesus life. He had once called them to leave their nets and boats and follow Him as fishers of people, but now they had returned to their former ways. Additionally, the life of fishermen could be shot through with a sense of scarcity. If they were to survive, they needed to catch fish and lots of them. But then a resurrection transformation occurs. (John 21:2-7a, 11b).

When the God who raised Jesus from the dead is at work, there is plenty of what we need to go around. The resurrection God provides is what resurrection people need to lead resurrection lives.

Prior to this episode on the seashore, John tells another story that takes place on Easter evening in Jerusalem. (John 20:19-22). The disciples are emotionally and physically locked in fear. And it is not an irrational fear; what had happened to Jesus on the cross might have happened to them.

But in a moment of amazing wonder, the Risen Lord comes into their presence and gives them the gift of peace. And more gifts follow. He breathes on them and says, “*Receive the Holy Spirit.*” Jesus is granting them the supreme gift of His own presence.

If we can understand the Holy Spirit to be the invisible yet real presence of God, then Jesus is freely bestowing on them His presence in such a way that His presence is not limited by time and space. This act of breathing on the disciples goes back to the event in Gen. 2, where God molds the shape of a human being out of mud, breathes on it, and makes it a living being.

In that room in Jerusalem on Easter evening, the new creation was beginning. The reign of God was breaking into the world. In this event, humanity has been allowed to begin the journey back to Eden, where all that was needed was abundantly supplied.

The God of the resurrection provides resurrection people with an abundance of all they need to live resurrection lives and to be agents of God’s resurrection mission in the world. We have no need to fear scarcity. The resurrection of our Lord is the paradigm/example/model of the way God works. Resurrection means fullness and abundance of life—all of life.

We Are to Learn Gratitude.

Resurrection gratitude is a key component to maturity in the spiritual life. Once we begin to develop an awareness of the resurrection generosity of God, the more we will understand that God daily gives us a multitude of reasons to be grateful people. Learning to be grateful is not optional. It is part of the process of becoming mature people of the resurrection. Gratitude is the gasoline that powers our journey with and to the Risen One.

Gratitude does not come easily or naturally. Anyone who has raised children knows the truth of that. We all have to work at gratitude to the God of the resurrection. Becoming thankful people is as important to the maturing of our inner lives as drinking milk is to a developing child. It is a habit of the heart that we need to cultivate.

After Peter says he's going fishing, the disciples spend the night on the water, but are not able to catch anything. As the sun rises, a figure on the shore says, "*Children, you have no fish, have you?*" They reply in the negative, and He instructs them to fish off the right side of the boat. They do it, and the result is that they catch so many fish, they are not able to haul the full nets into their boat.

It is at this point that the disciple whom Jesus loved has a flash of insight. "*It is the Lord!*" he shouts, and the group begins to make its way to the shore. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there—John 21:9, 12-14. This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after He was raised from the dead.

These are the ones who deserted Jesus during His trial and crucifixion. We can imagine for sure the disciples were carrying the burden of deep guilt and shame about their failure to stand with their leader, a burden they would never be able to shake. We might conclude that their guilt must have become even more serious as they were in the presence of the now-risen Jesus.

In an act of deep hospitality and acceptance, Jesus prepares and serves them breakfast. Most of us are rather careful about whom we invite to eat with us; we know a meal is an intimate and personal affair that we would not want to share with just anyone. We should not, therefore underestimate the impact of Jesus' forgiveness, demonstrated in the breakfast He has prepared with His own hands.

It would be hard not to recognize the overtones of the Eucharist in this story. We that every Eucharist leads the congregation into a meal that mediates the presence of the Risen Lord, a time during which we are invited to eat and drink in His presence, and thereby experience divine acceptance and forgiveness. Every Eucharist becomes that resurrection breakfast on the shore of the sea. The gathered disciples that day knew that Jesus had reinstated them as part of His family.

Forgiveness Changes the Past

Next, Jesus turns His attention to Peter. During Jesus' trial, Peter had attempted to watch the proceedings from outside the door of the high priest's house. Three times those standing with him identified him as a follower of Jesus, and three times he denied that relationship in forceful terms. Now, on the shore we see the leader of the

apostles standing before Jesus in a place of deep shame. Then follows a dialog between Jesus and Peter that both must have found painful. (John 21:15-17).

For every time Peter denied Jesus, he is allowed to reaffirm his love for Jesus. And each time, Jesus assigns Peter a role in the continuing work of the resurrection. Despite his denials, Jesus reinstates Peter into the fellowship of the resurrection and give him important work to do.

Scripture itself does not tell us exactly what happened to Peter in the following years, but just after the above episode, Jesus delivers a prophesy about the apostle's future. The prediction alone is vague, but the tradition of the church makes it clear. Long standing tradition says that Peter was crucified and buried. In the end, Peter did share in the judgment and condemnation of Jesus, although in a delayed manner.

We find ourselves on the shore where Jesus has come to seek us out, to accept us, to bless us, and to transform us. This happens in a powerful way in the Holy meal of the Eucharist. The Risen Lord knows us with all of our failures, mistakes, and intentional acts of injury. And yet He makes Himself present, feeds us on divine love, and gives us numberless opportunities to be rehabilitated.

Forgiveness does in fact, change the past. Forgiveness unshackles us from the shame and guilt we drag around with us. Forgiveness corrects our distorted vision, so that we can look at the past in a transformed way. Forgiveness proclaims to us that we do not need to be shaped in the present and future by our past.

Forgiveness sets us free from its burdens and allows us to pursue an open future. If we can internalize forgiveness, we are comforted and transformed into a resurrection way of life. But forgiveness does not end there. Forgiveness cannot be active in our lives unless we are willing to become agents of Christ-like forgiveness. We can't receive it unless we can give it. We can't give it until we have received it. Christ loves us so much that He accepts us just as we are. But He loves us so much that He will not let us stay the way we are. We must become agents of forgiveness. With that in mind, there are three facts about forgiveness from the resurrection stories in John 21.

First, even if we are the person offended against, we must take the initiative in establishing forgiveness. Jesus sought out His guilty band of followers. He took the initiative. There is no room here for "I'll forgive her if she apologizes" or "I'll forgive but I will not forget."

This applies to the church as well. In chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel, we find Jesus' plan for conflict management and reconciliation. He says, "***If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone***" (Matt. 18:15). Here again the offended party should not wait for the offenders to come to their senses and ask for forgiveness.

And again, the word is, "go"—we are to seek out the other and, between the two, work it out in private. There is not room here for gossip or backstabbing. In following Jesus' plan, we are acting positively as agents of resurrection life, and are both freeing ourselves and others from the past, liberating all for a new future.

Second, we are to forgive. We cannot just make ourselves be present and go through the motions of half-hearted attempt to set things right. We are to forgive, to set things right. The fact is that sometimes we do not want to forgive. When we are honest, we have to admit that we enjoy playing with our anger. We like to feel hurt and misunderstood. We want others to say to us, "You know, you are totally in the right, and you are justified in your anger."

As the letter to the Ephesians puts it, we should grow up. Our goal is to become mature Christian people, who can deal with disappointment and hurt in a resurrection, forgiving way. Our goal is to "***grow up***" (Eph. 4:15). The ability to forgive is a certain sign that we are maturing in our relationship with the Risen Lord, who is the source of all pardon and mercy.

Third, we need to own up to the fact that forgiveness always costs. In a situation where real forgiveness is needed, we will not find ourselves saying, "No problem." The need for forgiveness points to places of deep pain, guilt, anger, and shame. Real pardon is never easy. It will require that someone pays an emotional cost to effect a new relationship. We have already said that for Jesus to forgive His disciples, He had to do again what He did on the cross. His word was "*Father, forgive them.*" He stepped outside the cycle of retaliation and strict justice. The emotional cost must have been enormous.

Fourth, sacrifice is the hard side of forgiveness. But the truth is that all of us have made our way in life this far because of forgiveness and sacrifice. Parents sacrifice sleep to care for a sick child in the middle of the night. Teachers put up with low pay and the hassles of the classroom—they sacrifice—so that students can learn. Marriages endure because both spouses exercise sacrifice and forgiveness. We may not like it, but we must do it. The Risen One commands it. Forgiveness always comes

at an enormous cost, and when given, opens the door to a life-giving future. It is living the resurrection.

04/12/23

THE NAMES OF GOD

Intercessor

The God Who Maintains Our Peace

By

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Lesson 12

What does Scripture mean when it says that Jesus makes intercession for us? Biblical scholars hold various views on its meaning but let us begin with this scriptural definition of Christ our intercessor: ***“Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).***

The English word *intercession* means “to plead on another’s behalf.” This speaks of a figure who takes your place before others to plead your cause. So, an intercessor is one who pleads for you.

Jesus intercedes today to preserve His people, keeping us from sin and maintaining us in God’s love. He will not allow anything—any fear, and temporary fall, any accusation from Satan—to alienate us from the Father. In short, He prays for us in the same way He prayed for His disciple Peter: ***“that thy faith fail not” (Luke 22:32).***

Jesus has already paid the price for our sin, shedding His own blood. His nail-scared hands and feet are a perpetual testimony of what He has accomplished on our behalf. Scripture makes it clear that Jesus’ sacrifice has already given us full access to the Father. First, His work on the cross reconciled us to God. He opened to us the holy of holies.

Now we are in Christ, we cannot be separated from Him. We are bone of His bone, flesh of His flesh. His presence in heaven has given us the right to go directly to the mercy seat. In this way we have direct access to the heavenly Father. Jesus Himself said, ***“In that day ye shall ask me nothing. Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, he will give it to you” (John 16:23).***

Make no mistake: Jesus is our mediator. Through His shed blood He has reconciled us to God. Now nothing stands between us and the Father’s throne. This is one of the glorious victories Christ won for us at the cross.

A Simple Truth

I do not claim to know everything about Christ's intercession for us, but I do believe that whatever our High Priest is doing in His intercession for us, it is a very simple matter. And I believe that intercession has to do directly with the growth of His Body here on earth. He is at work supplying every joint and part with power and strength.

Christ's intercession for us is this: ***Jesus died on the cross to purchase peace with God for us—and He is in heaven right now to maintain that peace for us and in us.*** The peace we have with God the Father through Christ distinguishes our faith from all other religions.

Hindus worship thousands of gods. Muslims worship Allah. But in both the Hindu and Muslim worlds there is no peace. Why? These gods are powerless to pardon sin. According to their beliefs, people have to work and strive, hoping and praying they will somehow be relieved of their sins.

In every other religion besides Christianity the sin question is left unsettled. In them, sin's dominion has not been broken; therefore, there can be no peace: ***“There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22).*** We have a God who provides peace by pardoning sin.

Isaiah 48:17-18

This is the very reason Jesus came to earth: to bring peace to troubled, fearful human-kind. He testified, ***“These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace” (John 16:33a).*** Before He ascended to heaven, He said, ***“Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27).***

How does Jesus maintain God's peace for us? He does it in three ways: ***First,*** Christ's blood removed the guilt of our sin. In this sense, Paul says, ***“He is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14).*** Jesus made peace for us through His blood, and now we no longer have to tremble in fear at the devil's accusations. We have a heavenly Father who forgives and pardons our sin. He invites us to come boldly to His throne of grace, to receive His mercy.

Second, Christ maintains our peace and joy in believing: ***“Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope, through the power of the Holy Ghost” (Romans 15:13).*** ***“Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).*** We have a

God who forgives and pardons and, because of this, we can experience the joy and victory of having peace with the Lord.

Third, Jesus causes us to rejoice at the hope of entering glory: ***“We . . . rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:2).***

Colossians 1:20-22

Simply put, peace is the absence of fear—and a life without fear is a life full of peace. God promised us this kind of peace in the oath He made to Abraham. The Lord pledged to send a redeemer to His people to deliver them from all enemy powers. This redeemer would enable us to live holy lives and be without fear. (Luke 1:69-75).

Christ spent His years on earth preaching about offering the peace of God, and He gave God’s peace freely to all who received Him. Peter says Christ ***“multiplies peace”*** to us: ***“Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord” (2 Peter 1:2).*** Today, all who name Jesus as their Lord have received His divine peace—peace with God and peace within.

Also, when Jesus ascended to heaven, He did not just lounge in the glory that God bestowed on Him. He did not take His place of power at the Father’s right hand just to exult in His triumph. No, He went to the Father to maintain the hard-won peace He achieved for us at Calvary. Multitudes of Christians don’t live by this truth. They live in terror, always upset, worried about their salvation, letting their consciences condemn them. But Scripture says, ***“He ever liveth to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).***

A Double Threat

Two things threaten our peace with God and both involve sin: our conscience and Satan’s accusations. *First*, our conscience troubles and accuses us, and rightly so. *Second*, Satan’s accusations put fear in us. These are the two primary areas where Christ’s intercession applies to us.

Our High Priest will not permit our conscience to hold us captive. Nor will He allow Satan’s accusations against us to go unchallenged. Christ is our advocate with the Father against every accusation from hell.

What exactly is an advocate? It is simply our friend in court. For believers, this friend in court is also the Son of the Judge. In addition, our advocate is our brother. Matter

of fact, we are set to inherit the Judge's fortune along with Him. Does this mean the Judge is our Father as well? Yes, He is by adoption our adoption. The truth is, the Judge loves us as much as He loves His own Son. Now, don't misunderstand: this is not a rigged court. Although we are related to the Judge, He is absolutely just and holy, without exception.

It is important for us to realize that there are two courtrooms. The first court is in our hearts, where our consciences accuse us. The second court is in heaven, where Satan accuses us before the Father. Jesus' intercession takes place in both courts. Here Jesus deals with Satan's accusations.

When we sin, we break God's law. God's laws are unchangeable. They are the heart of His glory and He has to honor them. The Ten Commandments represent His moral law, and that law demands justice or payment. Now, you have to understand that we are not subject to the law as a means to salvation. In other words, we could not be saved by keeping the law perfectly. Instead, the law rules over our lives as boundaries of our behavior, and if we cross those boundaries, we commit sin. 01/04/23

The Law Saves Nobody but Convicts Everybody

You cannot fool your conscience. It has been trained by God in the divine law and knows it well. The conscience abides by God's law without partiality. Like a sheriff of the soul, it has to arrest and charge every lawbreaker. The conscience is no threat to law-abiding people, but if you break the law, your soul-sheriff springs into action. God has commissioned this sheriff to handcuff you, bring you to prison and not release you until the Judge says that justice has been served. It is nothing personal; the sheriff is just doing his job. He will not be prejudiced. He has to abide by the law.

The job our consciences perform is actually a wonderful work of God. He brings the law to us to show us the awfulness of our sin. Otherwise, we would develop a hard heart. An unrighteous person may try to bribe his conscience. The Bible calls this searing the conscience (1 Timothy 4:2). This means rendering your conscience insensitive to the law so that you can excuse any violation. In this case, your conscience releases you without charging you. It simply overlooks your sin.

But if you are a godly person, your soul-sheriff cannot be bought. He will arrest you and show you how serious your sin is. Then he will remind you that the law always seeks a penalty of death.

Have you ever been imprisoned by your conscience? Have you ever felt the agony and pain of sinning against almighty God? Have you ever been burdened by shame

and sorrow because you have broken God's law and must pay the penalty for it? Your soul-sheriff comes after you on many occasions. No matter what your failure may be, he is there shouting, "Guilty, wicked, unholy!" He reminds us that we face God's wrath.

At the same time that your conscience arrests and imprisons you, Satan stands in the heavenlies accusing you. "***The accuser of our brethren . . . which accused them before our God day and night***" (Revelation 12:10). Now, why would God allow the devil to approach His throne with accusations against any of His children. Why doesn't God ignore the charges that Satan brings against us? Speaking as a natural father, that's what I would do. If someone is just spreading rumors, I would not be inclined to believe them.

If the person who knocks on my door has a police officer with him, I will be inclined to listen. If my child accuser can back up his accusations with legal charges, then they are no longer spreading rumors. That officer is standing there for a reason. Now, it's a legal matter.

That is how Satan operates. He can only approach the Lord about us in legal terms. If his charges are true—if his accusations are based on actual guilt—then God must give him a hearing. Satan knows he cannot come to God accusing us with trumped-up charges. He knows our righteous Judge would never listen to bogus allegations.

Satan cannot accuse you before God's throne unless you are truly guilty. When he has a legal claim, he has a right to bring it to our Father. God is just; He will abide by His divine law. Whenever the devil comes to the Father to accuse you, it is because he has caught you breaking God's law. Before he comes to court, he makes sure that he is informed on all the facts against you. He calls in his demonic operatives to give him evidence against you.

Satan brings charges against those who are truly righteous in Christ. He makes sure that he goes after the devoted one who has fallen into iniquity, sinning against the light, because he sees this as his best chance to hurt someone who is totally surrendered to the Lord. When Satan goes to God's court, he goes heavily armed with evidence. He carries in a well-documented file of facts to back up his charges.

God has allowed Satan to appear in His court for only one reason: He is going to shut the mouths of every demoniac and human accuser, and He is going to display His holy justice before the world so that He can never be accused of injustice.

Your Advocate in Action

The devil has brought his charges against you. He has piled up evidence upon evidence against you. And you are sitting in prison, crying and weeping, full of shame and guilt. What do you do now? You call your defense attorney, your advocate, your friend in court—Jesus.

When your advocate comes to you, He does not pat you on the back and say, “It’s okay. Everything’s going to be all right. Don’t worry. No, He says to you, “Before I can do anything for you, I have to hear from you: Are you guilty? I know you are guilty, but do you know it? I cannot go to court and present a case against your opponent unless the truth has been acknowledged. So, do you acknowledge your sin and repent?”

You tell your lawyer everything: “Yes, I am guilty. I did it—I sinned. I don’t have any defense; I knew full well that I was breaking the law. I have been living in fear because I know I’m condemned. I realize justice has to be done and I know my penalty is death.”

At that point, Jesus begins to intercede in the court of your heart. He must be convinced that you are sorry—that you are admitting your guilt and repenting. Then Christ’s Spirit begins to groan in you, making sounds so deep they cannot be understood. This is the Spirit of Christ praying to the Father. ***“The Spirit also helps our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” (Romans 8:26).***

Now You Stand Trial

God your Judge knows that the charges against you are true. Your lawyer, Jesus, knows they are true, too, and does not bother to plead for you before the Judge. Instead, it is up to your advocate to prove that your accuser has no case. His intercession in this court has to do with satisfying divine justice and with God’s right to offer free pardon for your proven sins.

Jesus has His own evidence in hand. First, He has your repentance, your godly sorrow. Second, He has the indwelling of His own Holy Spirit in you, to keep you from going back to your iniquity. The devil proceeds. He names the charges, going straight to the law to point out what is written about your sin. “It’s right here, God. I have every proof against this man. You know full well what happened, God. You’re omniscient. You cannot deny that I’ve got the goods on this person.”

Your advocate already knows this is strictly a legal matter so He turns to the plaintiff and agrees with him. “Yes, My client is guilty,” He says. “He has broken the law. I know more about it than you do, devil. So, if it’s the law you want, Satan, I’ll give you the law.

You must know that the law makes provision for substitutional atonement. After all, if one Adam could bring down guilt on all of humankind, a second Adam could bring salvation to all who believe. This law allowed for everyone’s sins to be borne by a sacrificial animal. A goat was taken to the altar where it was sacrificed, its bloodshed, its life taken, its body consumed. Meanwhile, another goat—or ‘scape-goat’—was sent into the wilderness bearing the people’s sins. But now the blood of a perfect substitute has been provided, and it has washed away the sins of all who trust in God.”

“Yes, God’s law is holy and just. The lawbreaker must die for his sin. But, you see, Satan, a substitute has come to stand in for this guilty man before you, and that substitute has already paid the price for the man’s sin. One has already paid the death penalty. The full demands of the law have been satisfied. This man is now guiltless. He is absolutely free.”

At that point your advocate holds up His hands for the plaintiff to see. He states, “On this proof I rest My case: these nail scars on My hands, the scars on My feet, the wound in My side. I am the sacrifice, devil. You know I have paid all his debts. You have no case against My client.”

This ends all charges against you. No more can be spoken against you now. Your case is over—finished! Jesus’ blood has blotted out all your transgressions and you are free! The devil has nothing on you!”

There is only one way we can regain our peace with God and maintain it. We must deal with the devil’s accusations in legal terms. We can scream at Satan all day long, binding him, trampling him, ordering him around, but empty threats and human zeal have no power over him. He accuses us in legal terms, and we have to answer him likewise. We must deal with him in a language he fully understands: He must be bound with truth.

God’s Word is the legal truth by which we silence Satan. It is the legal document that declares our innocence and we are to stand on it all times. After all, Scripture was the legal language Jesus used to defeat Satan during His wilderness temptation:

“It is written . . .” God’s Word remains the legal authority that sends the devil fleeing.

Case Closed

Satan has lost his case against you, and you have the Judge’s document to prove it: God’s Word. Now the devil cannot hurt you where it counts, before the Judges’ throne on Judgment Day. But you have to rely on God’s Word and trust in it. You must stand up to your accusers and read them your document of release.

Your soul-sheriff, the conscience, abides by the law, and because Christ has proven legally that you are free, you can show the sheriff your release document. When he sees you have been declared free, he will move on to the other work.

The devil is another matter. He will rage over his defeat, threatening, “I may have lost the case in court, but I will win the battle in your mind.” He will harass and threaten you. He will have agents track you. He will tell you that God is mad at you. He will trump up false charges in your mind and make you feel unworthy. He will flood your mind with doubts, fears, lies from hell.

That is when you have to go on the offensive. Turn to your legal document. Trust it, stand on it. Never believe the devil’s lies against you. Find the law of Christ, chapter and verse, and throw it in Satan’s face: “When Jesus won my case, He gave me this document, devil. It says: ‘It is written. . . ‘I cannot be tried for the same charges ever again. So, you cannot accuse me with this same sin. The Judge has thrown out those charges for good. It cannot go back to court. I live, therefore, with the full assurance that my sins are forgiven. My sin question is settled forever.’”

Let no one—no devil, no human, no voice of conscience—rob you of the peace Christ has given you. ***“Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us” (Romans 8:34).***

Praise God for Christ’s dual intercession—in the court of your heart and in the court of heaven! Jesus, has you covered on all fronts.

Hallowed be His names.

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