

## The Judgment of Charity

Dear Friends,

Recently, in a sermon I preached from the opening verses of Acts 21, we noted the spirit that so evidentially motivated the Apostle Paul, his mission team members, and the brethren they visited in Tyre and Caesarea. Scripture records the apostle being strongly at odds with all brethren visited as well as with all members of his mission team with respect to his going to Jerusalem. The remarkable thing about this difference of opinion over timing and tactics is that it did nothing to undermine the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace that obtained between Paul and his brethren. They remained lovingly united in praying that God's will be done in, for, and through Paul. They remained so united because they regarded one another according to the judgment of charity. A number of those who heard the sermon in question have urged me to write it out, thereby enabling them better to consider and reflect upon what was said. In response to this urging, I have decided to write in this letter a summary of what I said in that sermon regarding the judgment of charity.

It is common for us to think of the judgment of charity in too low, sparse, and deficient terms. Often we can think of this judgment of charity as being a kind of soft and excessively generous treatment of our brethren. We see their faults and failings, but pretend like we do not perceive them, dishing out lavish amounts of unwarranted praise and encouraging affirmation instead of ministering the cold, hard truth. Nothing could be further removed from the true nature of the judgment of charity. It is not a sentimental covering of the truth so much as it is an apprehension of the whole truth of who we and our brethren are in Christ.

We find expressions of those aspects that constitute the judgment of charity throughout Scripture, but especially clear and comprehensive are those expressions we find in 1 Corinthians 13, Philippians 2: 1-11, and 1 John 4:7-21. From the scriptural data we can glean three movements of love, each movement containing two dimensions, all of which make up the judgment of charity.

The first movement is not how we love, but rather how God loves. We cannot possibly desire or be enabled truly to love our brethren if we do not grasp with vital apprehension that our God loves us and that He loves our brethren in Christ. Therefore, when I regard a fellow Christian, my judgment should not run along the lines of what I think of him or feel about him, but rather I should perceive that both he and I have been loved by the costly, precious, potent redeeming love of God in Christ. If the Lord has loved and saved me in spite of my sinful unworthiness prior to and even after my regeneration, and if my loving Lord has similarly loved my brother in Christ, should I not regard that brother as being precious in the sight of my heavenly Father and hence precious in my eyes? If God has so loved this brother with the saving love in which I rejoice, who am I to despise my brother?

If the first movement is God's love for me and for my brethren, the second movement of the judgment of charity is our love for God. The Bible teaches me that if I truly love God, I ought to love my brethren in the Lord (1 Jn. 4:21). It naturally follows that if I love God then I should love those whom He loves. However, the other dimension of this movement is our brethren's love for our heavenly Father. We are tempted to experience a variation of the log and speck in this regard. When we fail to regard our brethren charitably, it is often because whereas we assume that we love God (just as we can assume we have no log in our eye), we also assume that our brethren's faults and failings result from their not loving God (just as we easily see and magnify the speck in our brethren's eye). The judgment of charity considers that our brethren

are motivated as much by their love for the Lord as we are ourselves. And as we have our faults and failings in spite of, not because of, our love for God, so we should patiently, sympathetically, and charitably bear with the failings of others that arise in spite of their love for the Lord.

The final movement of the judgment of charity is that of our love for our brethren and theirs for us. We love them and they love us because our God has first loved us. He loved us while we were yet sinners, and He now accepts us in His beloved Son despite the activity of the remnants of our sinful natures. By the sanctifying work of God in us, His love steadily blossoms from a love of benevolence (loving us in spite of our sins) to a love of complacency (loving us because of the progressively imparted righteousness of Christ). Hence, the love of God for us serves to make us lovely. So it is with our love for the brethren and theirs for us. Such love has a sanctifying and beautifying power, leading us increasingly to behold each other not as worms we must love but as majestic ones of the earth whom we delight to love. The judgment of charity prompts us to encourage our brethren to love and good works, not to discourage them with negative criticism and confirm them in their sins. The judgment of charity directs and empowers us to perceive and act, not upon any denial of truth but rather upon the full truth that despite our sins and the sins of our brethren, God loves us and them, we and they love God because He has first loved us, and we love one another in the Lord. Therefore, when we judge the providence of our Lord and the performance of ourselves and our brethren through the filter of love, we shall find that we judge not contrary to but in conformity with the truth. To this blessed and blessing exercise of such exalting charity we are all called by God's Word, inclined by our new, redeemed natures in Christ, and enabled by God's loving Holy Spirit.

Yours in charity,

William Harrell

## Resting in the Redeemer

Dear Friends,

Do you think that the Christian life is hard? If so, what makes it hard, and if not, why does it seem so hard for so many professing Christians?

We can begin to consider this matter in terms of the context of the question and in terms of our defining what we mean by the word *hard*. Regarding context, the Bible alerts us to the fact that it is through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God. The sufferings of the apostles in the Book of Acts illustrate some of the sufferings of the faithful. Yet, do we always suffer? Is our calling in Christ always to be under the yoke of stress, straining, persecution, affliction, and sacrifice? And are these things the only elements that compose the Christian life? The true context in which we face the challenges and difficulties inherent in our pilgrimage of faith is one composed of trials and triumphs, sorrows and joys, pains and holy pleasures. Therefore, when we understand that the Christian life contains such mixed elements, we cannot and should not think or characterize the life of faith as being hard in the sense of it being unalloyed pain and suffering.

While the Bible is clear that the tribulations of the saints can be many, varied, and at times exquisitely painful and profoundly perplexing, the Word of God is emphatic in stating that all of our pains serve useful and sanctifying purposes in our lives. The thorns we cry to our God to remove from our flesh serve as prods to direct us to the abundantly sufficient grace of our Lord. The afflictions we endure come upon us by no accident or negligence on God's part, but are ordained by Him for the production in us of an eternal weight of glory. It is when we appropriate the divine grace that we begin to rejoice and boast in our afflictions and weaknesses, seeing the connection between them and God's glory and our good. It is when we feed upon the sure hope of that glory in view of which all of our sufferings should be considered as momentary, light, and, in fact, beneficial producers of glorious gain, that we begin to count ourselves blessed when we suffer for Christ's sake.

But there is more to this matter than our faithful appropriation of the truths and promises of God's Word and the enabling grace that He minister's to us by His Spirit. There is something intensely and essentially personal that transforms the pain of our sufferings into the blessedness of glory. We are not simply called to be nourished on grace and hope but rather to be strengthened by these qualities as they come to us in relation to their source, namely, our living and loving God. It is God's grace that enables us not only to endure our thorns in the flesh or resign ourselves to them, but also to rejoice in them. It is the hope that God gives us that feeds and fills us with joyful anticipation of the day when we shall see the face of our Redeemer, whose loving self-sacrifice has washed away all of our sins, whose healing hand shall wipe away all of our tears, and whose glorious beauty shall perfectly and perpetually captivate us and hold us in the matrix of the holy love that blessedly holds the three persons of our triune God in most perfect and joyful unity.

There is a priority that we should ever observe when we live our lives in Christ. There are principles of godliness and ordinances of divine grace, but above and before these is the

living and loving person of God. It is neither by the principles of godliness nor by the ordinances of divine grace that we are saved. It is by the person of God through the ordinances of His grace.

Jesus calls us to come to *Him* and promises us that *He* will give us rest. While we can only truly come to know Christ and His will and provision for us through His written Word, we should ever bear in mind that above that written Word stands the living Word. It is that living Word who has loved us and given Himself for us. It is that living Word who has reconciled us to God and brought us into His loving family and given to us glorious, eternal, abundant life.

We should learn to perceive in the written Word of Scripture not only the propositional directives and declared truths, incentives, commands, and prohibitions of God, but also the powerful and intensely pleasing aroma, the sweet, refreshing breath, the loving hand, the compassionate and merciful heart of our God. Although Scripture informs our prayers, we do not pray to the Bible, but to the living God who has revealed Himself to us in Scripture. When Paul says that he can do all things, he does not say that he does so through the directives of Scripture alone, but rather through the Christ whose loving divine person and reconciling work form the central testimony of all Scripture.

God has given us His Word, not so that in it we might find the ladder of our performance that leads to heaven, but rather so that we might apprehend the beauty of our holy, loving, and redeeming Lord. It is our God who has made and redeemed us for Himself. Our hearts are restless and our lives appear hard, until we find our rest, our peace, our contentment, our joy, our all in Him, in whose yoke we find felicity throughout our pilgrimage on earth (Mt. 11: 28-30), and in whose presence in glory is fullness of joy, and enduring pleasures (Ps. 16:11).

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## The Bible's Message in a Word

Dear Friends,

What word best summarizes the content of the Bible? I have received an array of answers to that question, such as: God, Christ, grace, truth, and love. In fact, there are many words in the Bible, and we need them all rightly to understand and gratefully to live our new life in Christ. However, while we should be committed to the whole counsel of God as contained in Scripture, it can be useful for us to consider the supreme theme that emerges from a right reading and understanding of the whole counsel of God. I believe that theme is *relationship*.

While it is true to say that the Bible is about God, or Christ, or truth, or love, none of these words (with the possible exception of *love*) captures the entire sweep of Scriptures with accurate portrayal of the content and contours of its teaching as well as does the word, *relationship*. The Bible speaks to us of the relationship between God and man. Scripture opens the eyes of our hearts to the relationship that the God of creation had with our first parents, who were the crown of His creation and the bearers of His image. We are told about the rupture of that relationship due to the sin and fall of Adam and all his posterity in him. Thereafter, the predominant development of Scriptural revelation concerns itself with the relationship that the holy God has with His sinful creatures. That relationship is shown to us in terms of our alienation from God and His righteous wrath toward our sin, while God's merciful compassion and redeeming love shine forth on every page of the Bible with growing and fullness and completeness.

This relationship between God and His people is expressed in the moral law, wherein the Lord expresses the character of the relationship between Himself and His people in the first table of the law and of His people with each other in the second table. Jesus, of course, rightly summarizes the law in terms of love for God and man, and we come to have such love only because the Lord has first loved us. Even the ceremonial law speaks of the relationship between God and man. The detailed and cumulative teaching of the ceremonial law speaks of man's separation from God, due to man's sin. It also and above that speaks of God's reconciling grace in drawing an unworthy people to Himself via a redeeming substitute sacrificed for the sins of His people. Accordingly, the ceremonial law, when rightly understood, shows the infinite separation of sinful man from the holy God of heaven and earth to be reduced to the dimensions of a thin veil within the temple, and the relatively easy terms of the worshipper trusting by faith in the efficacy of the atoning death of the sacrifices offered in his place, all of which pointed to the Lamb of God who would take away his sins.

In the gospel, this relationship attains its fullest development before it reaches its final consummation. That final consummation comes when in glory we see the face of our Savior and stand before our covenant God as His blameless and perfected children, reigning with Christ forever in glory. In the meantime, we live, serve, and walk by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us, and in the Father who loved us and gave His Son for us and now causes all things to work together for our good. We work out our salvation by the illuminating truths of God's Word and the enabling comfort and power of God's Holy Spirit who indwells us.

Why is it important and practical for us to understand that the major theme of the Bible is this relationship between God and His people? For one thing, such an understanding delivers us from the frustrating and inadequate conviction that the Bible is a book of mere truths, principles, and directives. The truth is that the Bible is the Word of and the saving, invigorating, and empowering breath of the personal God who has made and redeemed us in love. Our

understanding this supreme motif of relationship also goes a long way toward solving the painful and perplexing aspects of God's providence in our lives. Apart from this understanding we wrongly think and feel and act as through the trials and afflictions that come upon us bespeak a divine disappointment with us and distance from us. Such wrong thinking leads us into our trying to learn lessons we think God is endeavoring to teach us, then our trying to placate Him with our attempted works of repentance, or else to defeat and despair. However, when we recall that in His providential dealings with us, our Lord is committed to drawing us ever closer and more lovingly to Himself, we then can sincerely rejoice, even in our tribulations, knowing that none of them will separate us from the love of God in Christ, but will only serve to deepen our loving intimacy with Him.

This understanding of the primacy of holy, loving relationship among the children who are redeemed by their heavenly Father also rightly directs and sweetly and fruitfully empowers our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions with our brethren. When we know and are committed to the truth that we are destined only to grow closer to one another in the holy bonds of our common union with Christ, we shall be oriented toward rather than away from each other. We shall then not only think in terms of what is right, but also in terms of what is most prudent, profitable, and, above all, loving, when we regard our brethren and consider our attitudes and actions toward them. If we are destined by our God to be one day incorporated as mutually loving, precious living stones in His heavenly tabernacle and habitation, why should we wait until that day to be in such a holy, loving intimacy with our God and brethren? Let us then love our God and our neighbor now, as our saving God has called and empowered us to do.

Yours in growing intimacy,  
William Harrel

## Remembrance of James Philip

Dear Friends,

The Lord has given and now the Lord has taken away one of the most faithful, and fruitful ministers of the Word who has ever served in the Church of Christ. On 12 March, James Philip was called out of this life and into the nearer presence of the God whom he loved and served and whose gospel he proclaimed through a ministry that spanned more than half a century. We do well to recognize the great and enduring blessing that our Lord has given to the Body of Christ in the life and pastoral labors of James Philip.

My first encounter with Mr. Philip was in 1971 while I was stationed in Utah, serving with the U.S. Air Force. Through my father in the faith, Bill Fulton, who was himself a close friend to James Philip, I was introduced through recorded sermons to the sound preaching of this great servant of Christ, who, with his beloved friend, William Still, and younger brother, George Philip, formed a leading triad of reforming ministers in the Church of Scotland. I still vividly recall his sermon series on Romans and on Revelation. His exposition of Romans was, and still remains, a masterful feast for the soul upon the theological truths and loving mercies of God contained in the gospel. His exposition of Revelation opened a vision of heaven's glory and the encouraging and empowering victory of Christ over all challenges from the foes of His kingdom and redeemed people.

In 1972 I had the privilege of meeting James Philip and sitting under his live preaching of the Word. At that time, with characteristic patience, diligence, and loving devotion, he was expounding the practical treasury of Proverbs. My visit initiated me into the warmth, the humility, and the genuine Christ-like humanity of the man, not only in his pulpit, but also in his home with his family. I have treasured the privilege and spiritual profit that has been mine in knowing as a pastor and a friend over the course of nearly four decades this fine servant of Christ.

James Philip adorned his own profession of faith and enriched the Church through his faithful and fruitful works for the glory of God and edification of His people. His published works are classics of theological truth lovingly and practically apprehended and lucidly commended to his readers. His commentary on Romans is a gem of precious and potent gospel explication. His booklet, *The Christian Warfare and Armour*, reveals his profound and compassionately sympathetic understanding of the psychology of the saint under pressure, his discernment of the schemes of the devil, and, above all, his grateful grasp and generous commendation of the armor of God by which alone we are empowered to stand for Christ in the evil day.

My friend James was always careful and diligent in his study of God's Word, and such care showed in all of his preaching. His sermons were characterized by clear and orderly presentation, by his own profound and practical understanding of each Scripture passage he was preaching, set within his comprehensive grasp of the whole counsel of God. Above all, his preaching exalted the saving grace of God in Christ. He was such a pure instrument of the voice of God that those who heard him preach were more conscious of the Christ he preached than of the preacher himself. To the extent that we were aware of the preacher, we were aware of a man who, with sincere and genuine humility and loving devotion to his Savior, submitted himself to the Word and yielded himself gratefully to being mastered by its liberating truths and by the loving, sovereign, and saving Author of those truths. James Philip was a clear thinking exegete of Scripture but also a man who with warm passion and generosity proclaimed the reconciling truth of the Word. He found and declared Christ in all of Scripture; he gave a clear and simple

gospel appeal in every sermon.

This man, so mastered by the Word and Spirit of God, employed all of his gifts and energies by the enabling grace of God to minister Christ faithfully in all situations to which the Lord called him. He gave himself to the faithful fulfilling of his early ministry in the small fishing village of Gardenstown with no less diligent whole-heartedness than he gave himself in his later ministry at Holyrood Abbey Church in Edinburgh. God rewarded his faithfulness in the day of smaller things with a child in the faith, Thomas Swanston, who became himself a faithful and fruitful minister of the gospel.

It is a mercy of our God that He gave to us this prince of preachers in an age where so many of his fine sermons could be recorded. Through those sermons and his writings it is blessedly true that though he be dead, yet still he speaks to us. Just one week before his death, I listened to a sermon from 2 Corinthians 3 that he had preached more than 30 years ago. That sermon was as fresh, as relevant, and as satisfying and edifying in 2009 as it was when it was originally preached.

James Philip's life and ministry could well be summed up in the words of the great Apostle Paul: *I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe...* (Rom. 1:16). James Philip believed, and therefore he spoke words that moved and changed the lives of great numbers of people. He was, and always will remain to me, a sterling example of a faithful believer and a fruitful servant of the God of saving truth and love. Now he joins his beloved friends, William Still and Tom Swanston and countless others in the presence of the God whom he so deeply loved and served in this world. Into the joys of his heavenly Master, James Philip has no doubt heartily entered. Because he is now in heaven, he adds a cord to the growing number strands that draw our hearts and minds there, and in this, he continues to serve us well.

Yours joining many in grieving but with hope,

William Harrell

## Common Graciousness

Dear Friends,

We may all perhaps be familiar with the theological categories of God's redeeming grace and common grace. The former encompasses the Lord's eternal predestination of those whom He has chosen in Christ to be His adopted children and all that pertains to the accomplishment and application of their redemption that culminates in their reigning with Christ forever in glory. In distinction from such redeeming grace, the common grace of the Lord encompasses His upholding and governing of the world He has created, and especially His general benevolence toward both His people and those who are unregenerate. Sometimes this divine benevolence toward unbelievers can appear extravagant in the estimation of believers who are in a course of the loving sanctification of the Lord. We read about this in Psalm 73. The question that we should consider in view of the Lord's common grace is: Are we, the children of our saving Father, to be like Him in this way of dealing with those who do not know the Lord? Should there be a common graciousness of believers toward unbelievers?

In answering this question we must search the Scriptures, as we do for all of our answers. The Word of God has considerable teaching that indicates that we, as those who have been redeemed and as part of our grateful response to our God for His great salvation, are obliged to be merciful and gracious toward all men.

The Scriptures clearly and repeatedly command the people of God to love Him (Dt. 6:5). They also command the Lord's people to be kind to those who are strangers to the covenant of salvation (Lev. 19:34). Jesus with clarity and inescapable strength joined the love of God and the love of one's neighbor together when He summarized the essence of the Ten Commandments. (Mt. 22:37-39). Our Lord warned His disciples against their having an unloving and unmerciful attitude toward other sinners when he told the parable of the unmerciful servant (Mt. 18:23-34). The Apostle Paul charges believers to do good to all men, especially to those of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). He further directs the redeemed to owe no one anything but love (Rom. 13:8).

It may appear to us from the verses cited above that we who are in Christ should simply be kind and civil to unbelievers and even then only to those who are not too bad. However, Jesus makes clear that we are to love all men—not just to be civil toward them—and that this command especially includes those who are our enemies. He further connects our exercise of such common graciousness to our being children imitating our heavenly Father. Our Lord tells us plainly: *Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteousness.* (Mt. 5:44,45).

We find not only instruction but also examples of such common graciousness in Scripture. Paul was most respectful toward and with sincere love appealed to his persecuting fellow-Jews, as well as to such carnal and capricious Roman governors as Felix and Festus, and the Jewish puppet king Agrippa before whom he stood trial (Acts 13:16-41; 22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:1-29).

The temptation we must resist here is that of our trying to tear asunder what our God has joined together, namely, our love for Him and our love for our neighbor. We might be drawn to those passages of the Word where the prophets and Jesus Himself castigate those who honor God with their lips but hate Him in their hearts, and fail to perceive that what they did under special inspiration of God's Holy Spirit, does not give us warrant to imitate them. We

might think that the special order of God to His people under Joshua to exterminate the Canaanites gives us warrant to despise, hate, and seek to destroy our unbelieving neighbors. We might also employ logic, rather than theology, to conclude that if the unregenerate are bound for hell, we may as well treat them like condemned souls now. All such attitudes and actions are misguided and will serve not to glorify our gracious God but rather to grieve Him. Our Father does not delight in any of His children indulging in missions in which they seek and destroy the sinner.

Our God infallibly knows and hates all Esaus of the world, and there will be a day of reckoning for them. But that day is not this day and we are not judges of other men. As the Son of Man came not to judge but rather to save the world, so we are bound by our Lord to love all men for as long as we live in this shadow land of our pilgrimage. It is the antipathy of true piety that we should hold others in contempt and treat them with cold neglect. Our Lord Himself demonstrated the supreme act of common graciousness when He referred to the apostate Judas as *friend*, even as Judas was betraying our Lord and facilitating His arrest (Mt. 26:50). Can we really imagine such a gracious Master countenancing His servants' loveless, prayerless neglect of and animosity toward their enemies? If we truly know that He first loved us, then we shall love Him and others.

Yours growing in grace and love,

William Harrell

## Faith Lost and Found

Dear Friends,

Recently I heard on the radio a man interviewing people who had lost their faith. The testimonies varied. One lady said that she had prayed to God for her mother's healing. The lady told how confident she had been that God would hear her prayer and heal her mother because both of them had been faithful church-goers all of their lives. When the mother died, the daughter declared that she could no longer believe in a God who would deny such a worthy request. Others spoke of finding satisfaction in forbidden pleasures such as adulterous relationships or substance abuse.

As I listened to these testimonies of lost faith I thought to myself that what had been lost in every case was counterfeit not genuine faith. The parable of the sower and the four soils came to mind, as did the words of John in his first letter: *They went out from us, but they were not ever of us.* (1 Jn. 2:19). However, one man, who had a dramatic experience of apparent conversion, who had sought to know and do the will of God revealed in His Word, and who had been very faithful in his attendance at the means of grace, had taught Sunday School, and led home Bible studies, told of how he one day simply could no longer believe. He explained how for months he grieved over his apparently dying faith and cried to the Lord for revival. Then he told of how he reached a point where he realized he was living a fuller, more satisfying life without his faith. Rather compellingly he said that when he believed that he was heaven-bound, he lived in growing complacency and wasted time thinking that he would have eternity ahead of him. But without his belief in heaven and eternal life he said it was like his arising from a dream, if not from death, to live every day and every moment to the fullest, knowing that the days of this life on earth were all he knew he had.

As I have reflected upon that man's testimony, several thoughts have occurred to me. The first thought was of how gracious our God is, even to those who taste His mercies and witness the power of the kingdom, and yet turn away from it. The Lord, like the father in the parable of the prodigal son, does not punish such people but blesses them with His common mercies. Even of hypocrites Jesus said: *They have their reward.* (Mt. 6:2,5,16), meaning that if men seek the applause of men instead of the approval of God, the Lord will kindly let them feed on such husks...for a time.

Similarly, when Jesus spoke of the rich man and Lazarus as well as the rich, big barn-building fool who prospered in this life, our Lord did not indicate any divine impeding of such men's quest for worldly riches. Yet, here another realization came to me. Those who seek and find their reward only in this life one day all die and face divine judgment. What pleasure will they derive from their worldly pleasures then? The rich man who had ignored poor Lazarus in this life was in anguish in the flames of hell, desiring but not receiving a mere drop of water to relieve by a miniscule degree his torments.

Another thought that I had was how the man who says there is no God renders himself a fool. David declares: *The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.'* (Ps. 14:1). This is because those without faith have not made a wise discovery that God is but a figment of men's imaginations. Instead, the faithless are as men blind to and ignorant of a precious reality. They are like the servant of Elisha, who saw the threatening soldiers but did not see the greater hosts of the Lord (2 Ki. 6:8-17). They may at times think they have achieved paradise, but it is truly a fool's paradise that will be followed by a very real encounter with the living God, and His judgment of condemning them to an eternity of torment in hell.

Yet, in a more positive vein than these true but sobering thoughts my mind turned to my own finding of faith and the Lord's gracious opening of the eyes of my heart, thereby enabling me to know the wonder and growing satisfaction of His liberating truth, His transforming grace, the sweet fellowship of His people, and the ravishing pleasure of His immeasurable love. Surely all of us who have true faith know that, by God's giving, we possess the pearl of greatest price. Surely we who exercise that faith find in Christ, faith's only true object, a blessed and blessing Savior and incomparable peace and joy that make worldly pleasures seem as rubbish in comparison (Phil. 3:7-11).

Finally, my thoughts led me to one of the most famous *Pensées* of Blaise Pascal. In *The Wager*, Pascal considers how all men are wagering their lives by how they live in relation to a belief in God. For those who believe in God and live according to His Word, if He in fact does exist, theirs will be a life of love, joy, and peace here and now and one of eternal bliss hereafter. If God, in fact, does not exist, such believers will be no worse off in death than any others and they will be a great deal happier in life. For those who live as though God does not exist, their lives in this world are full of unattainable desires and unsettling uncertainties, followed by a supposed eternal non-existence. Yet, if God does exist, theirs is an eternity of torment. Therefore, the option of theism dominates that of atheism. So why would anyone not want to believe in the saving God of the Bible? That is a question for which all unbelievers will have no answer in the final Day of Judgment.

Faithfull yours,

William Harrell

## Glimpses of Lost Powers to be Regained

Dear Friends,

In his book titled *Miracles*, C. S. Lewis writes concerning the time when Christ walked on the Sea of Galilee that it was a glimpse given to us of the powers of the new creation. By that he meant that whereas many of the miracles of our Lord demonstrated some of the powers that the first Adam lost in his fall, the miracle of Jesus walking on water represents a power beyond anything that the first Adam had. The fact that Peter was enabled to join Jesus for a time on His aquatic stroll indicates that those who are in Christ are bound to inherit such powers through their union to the Second Adam that exceed what would have been theirs had the first Adam retained his original righteousness. Such miracles of the old creation contained in that dominion over the paradise that Adam lost, as well as the singular glimpse we have into the powers of the new creation, help us to form some conception of the wonders of that glory for which we Christians are bound and which we shall find to be incomparably greater than all the sufferings we will have endured through our lives in this world (Rom. 8:18).

In addition to Scripture's testimony, we find in the testimony of creation traces of our powers that have been largely lost and which we in Christ are surely bound to regain. For example, there are reports of seemingly incredible powers of perception and feats of strength that people experience when in a crisis. When I was a boy, I read a newspaper account of a woman who lifted the rear end of a car off her child who was trapped under it. There is also the more common phenomenon of altered perception and performance that athletes refer to as their being in the zone. Additionally, many people who have had near-death experiences report that in their crises the passage of time slowed dramatically while they saw the events of their lives flashing before them.

The feats of strength can at least to some degree be explained as our fearfully and wonderfully made bodies producing a flood of adrenalin to help us fight or flee from the crisis. The experiences of heightened perception were the subject of a recent fascinating medical study I heard discussed on a radio program. Apparently, when we are in a life-threatening crisis, our brain processing speeds up greatly. It is not that time slows, but that we in a crisis are temporarily enabled to process information more rapidly and make decisions more clearly and quickly.

I have myself experienced both phenomena. As a track runner and football player in school, I recall three distinct occasions when I was in the so-called zone—a state in which one's body experiences a burst of speed and power appreciably beyond what anyone thought possible, while the mind is heightened to a concentrated and effective awareness that brings the challenge at hand into crystal clear focus, while the complex features needed to meet the challenge are easily and perfectly grasped.

As a mature adult, I experienced my most vividly and accurately recalled incident of altered awareness when I fell from a tree I had climbed to prune. I fell from a height of about 15 feet, and I had a chainsaw in my hand. As I fell less than half a distance that should have been covered at a rate of 32 feet per second (if you are not good at math, it took less than half a second for me to hit the ground), I had clarity of mind and seemingly plenty of time to think about tossing the chainsaw, then, deciding that I might land on it, I determined to hold on to it but to keep it at an outstretched arm's length from my body. I pondered how I would land and what, if anything, I could do to lessen my likely injuries. I decided to try to achieve a slight rotation of my body so that I would land on my feet, and I slightly flexed my knees so that my legs could act

as shock absorbers. When I landed, as my feet hit, I counter-intuitively locked my knees, and, because I had landed at a slight backward angle, this action resulted in my rolling over backward and springing up onto my feet, all the while holding out the chainsaw. I was completely uninjured! A safer landing from such a height could not have been better planned or executed.

Why do I write these things? Because the Word of God and the experiences of our lives teach us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in our personal philosophies. To me, such experiences give glimpses into the amazing wonder and glorious character of the promise that *...we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet...and that...this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.* (1 Cor. 15:52-54).

When he was alive and preaching through the Book of Revelation, my friend James Philip remarked concerning the Apostle John falling down to worship the angel who had shown him the vision of the new heaven and earth (Rev. 22:8,9), that if an apostle prostrated himself before an angel, what would we do if we saw a glorified saint for whom the angels are but servants (Heb. 1:13-14)? Surely for us the best is not only yet to be, but the glorious powers that are to be ours are far greater than we can now grasp. But at least we can glimpse them and find from such glimpses that grateful wonder replaces our worries.

Yours in joyful anticipation,

William Harrell

## Holy Law and Costly Grace

Dear Friends,

I have been thinking about the grace of God, not so much in terms of how that grace affects us as the Lord's redeemed people, but rather in terms of how such grace has affected our Lord Himself. Such thinking is not a matter of mere human speculation, for there is much teaching about it in God's Word. Nor is such thinking arcane and impractical, for everything that is revealed to us by God in His Word is for our instruction and edification.

We are all perhaps familiar with some of the formulations that result from our reflections upon the contrast between law and grace. We know that any formulation that separates law and grace or exalts one while excluding the other is wrong. Christ did not die to make us either legalists or libertines. The Son of God was given by the Father and laid down His life for us because God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit loved sinners with a saving, redeeming love (Jn. 3:16). God does not love us by His law, holy and righteous, good and necessary as the divine law may be. Divine law can only regulate and restrain sinners; divine love redeems and transforms them. But law cost God nothing; grace cost Him everything.

The consideration of the contrast between grace and law focuses on the nature of our redemption primarily from our receptive perspective. As sinners, we who have violated divine law naturally dread the law of God and seek to suppress the knowledge of it. As redeemed sinners, we rightly rejoice in grace and in the marvelous truth that in Christ mercy has triumphed over judgment (Jas. 2:13). However, there is more to grace and law than our receptive perspective (that is conditioned by our personal needs and dispositions) would lead us to understand. Therefore, God has revealed to us how the features of His holy law and His redeeming grace relate to Him so that we might have a deeper and higher grasp of the beauty of His holiness and the wonder of His love.

To speak of law and grace, we are speaking of active communications of more fundamental divine attributes. Law is an expressive function of God's holiness of being and of His righteousness of doing. Grace, which is the Lord's lavishing of His favor upon undeserving sinners, is an expressive function of God's mercy and love.

When we think of grace and law, we naturally supposed that law is the harder and more inexorable of the two. But God reveals to us that the opposite is true. When the righteousness of God is offended by man's sinful violation of divine law, it grieves the Lord who is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). During His earthly life, Jesus wept tears over the sinful persistence of the people of Jerusalem (Mt. 23:37). But such divine grief over the offense of violated divine law would have been for God infinitely easier to bear than has been the actual cost of our redemption. The judgment and exercise of holy judicial wrath against sinners may give the Lord no pleasure (Ezek. 33:11), yet in infinite contrast, the Lord's redemption of sinners has brought upon Him infinite pains. The former cost God tears; the latter has cost Him the blood of His only begotten and beloved Son. In contrast to His tears over unrepentant Jerusalem, our Savior sweat drops of blood in Gethsemane as He anticipated not only the physical pains but more so the spiritual anguish that lay before Him as He who knew no sin would become sin and bear all of sin's awful consequences in order to redeem His people. Then, at the cross, He shed His blood and poured out His soul to accomplish our redemption (Isa. 53:12).

Therefore, when our God planned in the counsels of eternity and prepared over the course of time and accomplished in the fullness of time our redemption, He was doing an infinitely

harder and more costly work than when He published His law or when He punishes sinful violators of His law. This is seen to be true also when we consider that mere men—all men—can and have violated God’s law, but that not one of the redeemed can ultimately rebel against the saving love of God in Christ that issues forth His irresistible grace (Jn. 17:12).

As good and perfect as God’s law may be, it is but the expression of the Lord’s holy character and a directive decree of His righteous will. But the grace of God is the supreme fruit of His loving disposition and His infinitely costly determination and accomplishment of that which actually transforms sinners into justified saints. Our understanding of this will serve to keep us from developing truncated, superficial, and unbalanced views of our redemption. It will usher us into the most profound apprehension of the Person and work of our Triune God. It will also anchor our souls in the love of God that both preceded and will eternally outlast the partial revelation of God in Scripture as well as His provisional gifts of faith and hope (1 Cor. 13:13). It is from the treasury of the riches of God’s glory that He grants to us to know the unknowable magnitude of the love of Christ, which to know fills us with the fullness of God (Eph. 3:16-19).

Yours in His grace and love,

William Harrell

## The Importance of Timing

Dear Friends,

Our expressions, whether in words or works, result from a complex combination of factors. Primary among these factors would be the heart's inclination toward right or wrong, good or evil. However, even when we desire to know and do that which is good, a number of facets enter into the matter of our speaking and acting. We must speak the truth, but do so in love; we must formulate our words and works, taking into account the capacities of those who will be affected by them, so that we do not cause needless confusion or offense; we must also consider what we do or say, as well as the measure and extent of our expressions. Added to all of these, timing is an important consideration.

People say that timing is everything. While that saying is not strictly true, it is false to assume that timing is of no account. The man who stands in a place where a boulder falls would have avoided injury or death had he stood there at an earlier or later time. The poor musician who sounds a note too soon, too late, or holds it too long, mars the music. The person who shouts, *Surprise*, before the man enters the room whose birthday the hidden guests have gathered to celebrate spoils rather than enhances the party.

As critical as timing is for most things, and as vital as it is for some things, we can be insensitive to its importance. A due sense of timing is not a natural endowment but rather an acquired skill. Our Lord trains us in its acquisition not only through the sorts of natural incidents mentioned above, but also and especially through His claim on one day out of each week. Actions that are legitimate and right on six days of any given week are regarded by God, if not by men, as being sinful if done on the Lord's Day. The vital nature of right Sabbath observance is seen, for example, when God tells His people that if they violate the sacred time with their secular doings, they should be cut off from the Lord's people (Ex. 31:14). While this express provision is articulated in the dispensation of the shadows of redemption, we should not think now in the dispensation of the substance that our Lord is less zealous for His propriety in that day.

Once we come to appreciate the importance of timing, we should consider how it is that we can have a right sense of timing. The answer is not that we seek signs, wonders, or hidden knowledge, but rather that we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord who made time as part of His creation and who uses time masterfully. Our God gave His Son as a ransom for many in the fullness of time. Jesus evaded those wanting to stone Him because His time had not yet come. Our Savior also told His own disciples that He had many more things to tell them, but that the time for such telling would arrive when their spiritual capacities increased.

The living Lord is our personal guide to a sense of right timing. There are also principles expressed in Scripture that serve to sharpen our focus on this matter of timing. For example, we are told that right timing is set between the extremes of rashness and procrastination—both of which our Lord condemns. Furthermore, the Word lays definite emphasis on patience (a facet of the fruit of the Holy Spirit) more than on the pro-active tendency that many extol in our superficial and hurried day. King Saul would not have been rejected by God had he been more patient in his waiting for Samuel. If Peter had taken time to think and pray on the Mount of Transfiguration, he would not have spoken so foolishly about building tents and would not have been rebuked by the cloud and Word of God. Many times in God's Word we are directed to wait upon the Lord. The heroine of our current Bible Reading Notes, Esther, shows herself to be possessed of a sense of the need to wait for the Lord to take initiative before she ventures to do

so.

In addition to these things, we do well with prayerful honesty to analyze our motives when we consider the matter of timing. Do we rush to say or do something from a sense of unbridled eagerness? Do we delay to speak or act because we are fearful or lazy? Sinful motives cause us to miss the mark of righteousness in every way, including right timing.

While a bad sense of timing can mar if not ruin an endeavor or a relationship, an accurate sense of timing, when exercised, is a beautiful thing that brings to others great blessing. Apt timing is a component of true wisdom. Wise Solomon said rightly that words spoken in fitting-temper, truth, and timing are like apples of gold in settings of silver (Prov. 25:11), precious, beautiful, desirable, and sweetly facilitating the acceptance of expressions of truth made in love. Let us, then, give time and effort to our attainment of and advancement in this critical matter of right timing in all that we think, say, and do.

Ever yours,

William Harrell

## Reformation and Reaction

How are imbalances in doctrine and defects in faith and practice rightly to be addressed in the Church? One way that is often employed is that of reaction to the problem while another other way is the way of reformation. These are not two equally valid and effective responses to problems of ecclesiastical faith and life. The way of reaction is often one of trying to fight fire with fire and of aiming for a conquest and vanquishing of those deemed to be in error. The way of reformation fights the fires of error and the tarnish of imbalanced doctrine with the water of God's Word and with the aim of correcting and lovingly edifying those in error.

When I refer to the way of reaction I mean those courses that follow a specific pattern. According to this pattern, a doctrinal imbalance or defect in Christian living is met with a reaction that is opposite to the problem being addressed. Such movements may aim to restore doctrinal and practical balance in the Church, but because they are themselves reactionary they are laded with their own defects of imbalance. For example, the Charismatic movement arose as a reaction against the problem of dead orthodoxy and an overemphasis upon the rational apprehension and ministry of the gospel. But the reaction of this movement has with self-conscious determination placed an undue premium upon the emotions and those things that stimulate lethargic feelings. The result has been that where Charismatic teaching prevails, a balance between the facts of truth and the feelings of experience does not result, but instead the so-called new wine of the emotional imbalance simply gains ascendancy over the old imbalance of dead orthodoxy.

The same dynamic may be observed in all reactionary movements that have arisen in the Church in recent years. The Sonship movement openly proclaims to be a reaction against a loveless and impersonal theology that touts categories of systematic theology and principles of morality over a living, loving relationship with the Lord. But the reactionary teaching of Sonship has committed the error of trying to subsume all heads of doctrine under that of the believer's adoption by God's grace. This overemphasis of the personal has tended to overshadow other teachings of Scripture that have been given by our living God who is to be worshipped and adored as our loving, adopting Father.

The Federal Vision and New Perspective movements have also arisen as reactions against extreme individualism in faith and practice. But because these movements, too, are reacting against faults and defects in faith and practice, they fall into opposite extremes and errors of faith and practice, wherein corporate identity practically absorbs the individual.

The way of reformation is different. It is less simplistic and martial than reactionary movements; it is more balanced and, because its effects are less immediate, more patient and confident in its own right and ultimately effective power. The aim of reformation is not to counterbalance excesses, but to supply the needed fullness and depth that are lacking in all defective faith and practice as well as in all of the reactionary movements those defects have spawned.

Those who are reactionary arise armed with neglected elements of right faith and practice, and proceed to advance those elements with a martial zeal intended to achieve the unconditional surrender of all believers to the emerging excesses. In contrast, reformers lovingly embrace their erring brethren, grieving over their defects, but patiently and confidently endeavoring to apply the teaching of the whole counsel of God as the proper and only lastingly effective corrective to the defective faith and practice. What reactionaries attempt by their advocating certain neglected portions of dogma and accepted expressions of worship and devotion, reformers actually achieve

by their own love for and knowing and making known the full range of revelation of the excellencies of the person and work of Christ as contained in Scripture.

We do not correct a partial theology with another partial theology that is composed of the missing parts of the first theology. Only a theology composed of every jot of the Word of God that will outlast heaven and earth is a true and lasting theology. Only one's grasp by faith of the Christ and His saving work fully portrayed in the Word of God and accurately presented in the proportions that are set out in Scripture will give genuine new life, new power, new love, and new hope to those languishing by their feeding on scraps of truth. When defects and imbalances arose in the days of God's prophets and apostles, they did not devise partial theologies in reaction to the defects, but rather declared the need and their determination to resort to the Law and testimony of God in all of its fullness, knowing that if any speak not according to the whole counsel of God, it is because they have no light, no life, and no love that issue from the one thing and the totality of that one thing necessary (Isa. 8:20; Acts 20:27).

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## The Sabbath a Delight

Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter on a day when elections are taking place for various state officials. One of the prominent themes that certain candidates have sounded throughout their campaigning was the cry that our state of Virginia must continue to be progressive and not elect candidates who would drag us back to by-gone policies. One such by-gone policy that has changed is the state law that closed stores on Sunday. The so-called Blue Law is almost universally viewed as a primitive and oppressive law that kept people from doing what they wanted to do on Sunday. Even among Christians there were few tears shed when the Blue Law was repealed.

I am not as concerned that the civil magistrate has changed a law that prohibited commerce on the Lord's Day as I am concerned that the vast majority of professing Christians have come to view the Christian Sabbath as a legalistic binding that must be broken in the name of divine grace and Christian liberty. What light of divine revelation has contributed to this view? What facet of practical theology has touched the hearts of so many believers in a way that would prompt them to cry for a less sacred Lord's Day?

For decades I have served on a Presbytery Committee that examines candidates for the gospel ministry. In recent years, at least half of those candidates take exception to what our Constitutional Standards (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*) teach on the matter. Our Standards, that purport to be a summation of biblical theology, declare that the whole of Sunday should be devoted to the exercises of public and private worship, except for deeds of necessity and mercy, and that so far as possible all labor and worldly recreations that are on other days permissible should be avoided.

Those taking exception tend to do so with the express prohibition of worldly recreations. Repeatedly, some of us on the committee have endeavored to comprehend under what biblical rubric the allowance of worldly recreations on the Lord's Day is claimed by the candidates in question. So far, no candidate has made a persuasive case to support his exception. The matter tends to fall out as a practical concession to personal desire and to what is perceived as the desire of a majority of Christians, all under a vague appeal to God's grace.

Therefore, I have shifted to a more practical basis my own tactic in examining candidates' exceptions to the right observance of the Lord's Day. I ask, for example, whether the candidate intends to teach his congregation by precept and his own personal example that the allowed recreational time should increase and the time for worship decrease. When put in such practical terms, no candidate so far has declared his zeal to expand recreation and diminish worship. Or to put it more personally, I ask whether the people will be taught that when they tire of holy and loving communion with the Lord, they should refresh themselves not with allowable deeds of necessity but with worldly recreation. So far no one has declared that Jesus, who calls us to come to Him rather than to our own misguided pleasures for rest should be left for recreation.

In these practical ways, the logic and even loveliness of God's gracious provision of a weekly Sabbath for His people becomes more apparent than when conflicting exegetical positions engage, if not clash. While men may quibble over the precise definition of the words *worldly* and *recreations*, no one who in good faith looks to Christ for salvation is going to say that less of the Redeemer and more of worldly recreation will glorify God and enhance the edification of His people.

Two years ago I was in Peru on a short teaching mission. In the city of Trujillo, where I

taught, less than half an inch of rain falls annually. Consequently, water is drawn by the city largely from Andes Mountain runoff and provided by the city for its homes and businesses for about two hours a day. Yet, most buildings have large water tanks that are filled during the hours in which city water runs, so that people can use the water they have gathered in reserve at other times of the day. It would be a rare and strange person who in Trujillo argued for the times when city water flows to be diminished so that people could devote themselves to recreation instead of the business of filling their storage tanks in order that they might have water throughout the day.

The Lord has commanded us to keep one day out of seven holy to Him. The sum of this commandment is as the sum of all the Law: to love the God who has first loved us. To the degree that we turn from this law of love we turn from the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself for us. The command of God to keep His Sabbath holy is a blessed privilege lovingly designed by God, not to tire or bore us, but to enable us to feed upon Christ and the edifying ordinances of His grace and to drink in His grace, truth, and love, without the distraction of our necessary labor, that is part of God's curse on the earth. Why would any of us want to diminish the divinely appointed time of communion with our loving Savior for the sake of anything less?

Yours grateful for His Sabbath rest,

William Harrell

## The Status of our Secret Sins

Dear Friends,

The question of whether or not God will on the Day of Judgment expose to the world of men and angels the secret sins of His redeemed children is one that vexes many and is somewhat unclear to all men. On the one hand, there are passages in Scripture that appear clearly to say that, on the day of divine reckoning, all people will be compelled to account for their every idle word and secret deed, and even thought (Mt. 12:36; Lk. 12:2, 3; Rom 14:12; 1 Tim. 5:24). On the other hand, there are passages that seem to indicate that the Day of Judgment for believers will be a day not of the exposure of any of their sins, but rather their full and final salvation from those sins and the perfection of their entrance into the joy and glorious reign of their redeeming Master (Mt. 25:31-14; Rev. 21,22). How is this vital and somewhat vexing question to be decided?

To begin our consideration of this question, we should understand that the precise and full answer to it is not so much a matter of it being of those revealed things that belong to us, but rather is of the secret things that belong to our God. While there are hints that all things, including all our sins, shall be made known, it is far from a certainty that the first part of our life in eternal glory shall be spent with an exhaustive exposure of our secret sins and those of all of humanity committed over a cumulative period of trillions of years. The nature of the question and the limited light our Lord has given us concerning it make it ultimately for us to be a matter in God's holy and just and loving hands.

This is not to say that we can gain no understanding of this matter. We can go far in our apprehension of a true and sufficient grasp of the question when we pose it in view of certain clearer and more precisely detailed truths that are revealed to us in Scripture and confirmed by our experience of life in the kingdom of our heavenly Father's grace.

For example, we must seek to understand this question in view of what we know about the character of our God. He who has in love predestined us to adoption, that we should be holy and blameless before Him (Eph. 1:4,5) can be trusted to decide what, in the Day of His Judgment, should be declared from the housetops and what should be buried in the sea of His holy determination to remember no more. We can rely on the love of our Father to reveal or to hide for His glory and our good, knowing that our joy, gratitude, and loving devotion to Him will be infinitely increased and in no way diminished or dampened by His determination.

We should also consider the matter in view of the treatment we see God the Father and Christ His Son affording sinners throughout the pages of Scripture. There is, when earthly divine judgments are rendered, a decided tendency for our God to treat His people with a hand that covers rather than explicates their sins. With Adam's sin, God does not specify charges of sin so much as ask our fallen first father questions, in a Socratic method that is surely designed to lead him and us to search and confess what he and we have done. Regarding our first parents' shame that was a consequence of their sin, God covered it quickly with animal skins of His provision. Similarly, when the woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus for judgment, our Lord first scattered her accusers then declared that He did not accuse her and sent her on her way with a tenderly gracious admonishment to sin no more. The only time Jesus exposed sin in detail was when He castigated the Scribes and Pharisees who with resolute refusal to accept His saving grace, sought to cover their shame with the rags of their own righteousness and their murderous intention with the clothing of their wicked hypocrisy. In the letters to the seven churches in the opening chapter of Revelation, Jesus also charges some (not all) of the churches with certain

failures to appropriate His grace, but that is with a view to sanctifying correction, not judgmental exposure and condemning.

The character of the justifying work of Christ also has impact on this question. He died on the cross, was raised from the tomb, and ascended to heaven ever to intercede for us so that He might present us to Himself having no spot or wrinkle (Eph. 5:27). When we confess the sins of which we are aware, we are told that our God not only forgives those sins we stipulate but even cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 Jn. 1:9). This He does through the advocacy of His righteous Son, who is the propitiation for all of our sins and all of their consequences (1 Jn. 2:1,2).

Although these considerations appear to negate any exposure of our secret sins in glory, yet we who have died to sin should be determined no longer to live in it, not so much because we fear ultimate exposure, but rather because we regard with profound gratitude the saving love that has justified us. So thorough is that justification, and so secure are we in it, that even if all of our sins are published to men and angels in glory, those sins will be to us then as Pharaoh's army was to Moses and the Israelites: when the pursuing Egyptians were alive, they were dreaded by the people of God; but when they were put to death in their immersive baptism in the Red Sea, the people of God rejoiced over them exceedingly and sang their grateful and loving praises to their Lord, to the glory of His saving grace and power. In this life, we know only in part. In glory, whatever is published or withheld about us, we shall know all and be known by all not as great, hypocritical, secret sinners, but only, ever, and always as beloved, redeemed, and holy members of the glorified bride of Christ (Rev. 21,22). That is all we can know now and all we truly need to know forever.

Yours, the sinner saved by grace,

William Harrell