

2010

January

Divine Denials and Delights

Dear Friends,

On a recent Sunday, we had a heavy snow descend upon us here in Norfolk, Virginia. We, along with almost all other churches in our region, wisely recognized the divine providence that prevented us from having our regular services on that Lord's Day. We and many other brethren in Christ were confined accordingly not only to our homes, but also to a day of private and family worship, being deprived of the opportunity for regular corporate worship. Our resort to such reduced means of grace gave us but a small taste of the hidden manna that has sustained the Lord's people in times of their captivity in the past and, in some places, even today. One result was that on the Sunday following, we gathered together with a spiritual relish and deepened sense of gratitude that was manifested through the large attendance at worship, despite a fresh layer of snow covering icy roads and walkways. The preaching was more galvanized, the hearing more attentive, the singing more hearty, and our fellowship more sweet and lovingly prolonged—all due at least to some degree to our having been deprived of the opportunity to gather for worship the previous week.

Our experience fits the pattern of our Lord's depriving dealings with His people. In His Word, God tells us that there are times when He hides Himself from us, or deprives us of a sense of His approbation and comfort—all with a view to stimulating our love and gratitude so that we seek Him with stronger zeal and the totality of our hearts (Jer. 29:13). Our Westminster Confession of Faith tells us of our Lord sometimes withdrawing the light of His countenance, and suffering even His strongest servants to walk in diminished light (WCF XVIII: IV). Sometimes our heavenly Father does this as a correcting chastisement, and sometimes as a refining reward for our faithfulness in little things that will prepare us for faithfulness in greater things. In any case, the result is always the same: we are more pure in our love, more strong in our faith, and have a deeper gratitude for our God, His salvation, and His means of grace than what we possessed prior to the divine deprivation.

This leads us to a better understanding of our Lord's sanctifying work in our lives. He ordains our disappointments and failures and frustrations and defeats at the hands of sins we thought we had mastered (when we really should have mortified them) and Satan whom we thought we were resisting with a strong faith. Our God ordains our afflictions, trials, troubles, and losses of things we regarded as precious—all so that we might develop a truly stronger faith in and love for Him and His ordinances and His people and come to a greater apprehension of His love for us and the great wisdom and power He employs to break our lives only to build them up again better. Let us, then, even in these times of deprivations, denials, and deaths, learn to regard the joy that is set before us of new and vastly improved lives and estates and relationships with our God, our brethren in Christ, and our neighbors.

Yours in growing thankfulness,

William Harrell

February

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

March

Tensions in Scripture

Dear Friends,

There are great tensions in Scripture. For example, there are such teachings as divine sovereignty and human responsibility, as well as the clear teaching on the necessity of faith and good works being joined together in the believer's life. The supreme tension is found in the person and work of Jesus, who was and now is and shall forever be fully God and truly man, and whose work was one of His holy heavenly

Father putting to death His only begotten Son for the sake of vile sinners. These things and others like them are regarded by unbelievers as absurd contradictions in the Bible. Even some believers endeavor to resolve the apparent contradictions by their opting to believe one doctrine, such as human responsibility, while denying or at least ignoring the companion doctrine of divine sovereignty. Such endeavors issue from men's reliance on their own powers of logic instead of their trusting in the Lord to reconcile such apparent contradictions. Precisely speaking, these sorts of challenging doctrines are not contradictions, but rather vital companions. How they go together may be mysterious to us, but their incomprehensibility does not make them untrue. In fact, the intellectual and emotional tension that results when we assert the compatibility of such seemingly inconsistent doctrines provides the energy that drives us on prayerfully to explore the depths of the Word. We do this not in a quest to discover a unifying principle so much as to embrace the person of God, who alone understands every jot of His Word and how all aspects of it cohere perfectly.

I write these thoughts as an introduction to a brief consideration of two aspects in the biblical revelation that we are to work out in our lives that seem, at least at times, to be contradictory. These two aspects are righteousness and love. The Bible clearly teaches us that we are required to do right according to God's moral standard and to His satisfaction. Although every soul who has ever lived on earth (or ever will live) is a sinner (except Jesus), every soul knows right from wrong and knows that God requires man to do right.

Love is harder to define than is the doing of right. Too often love is thought of as a mere feeling. Even when we understand that love prompts the one loving sincerely to desire and diligently to serve for the highest good of the one beloved, it remains very difficult for us to determine what precisely is the highest good for a given person at a given time. This can be so because at times the dictates of love can seem contradictory to the dictates of righteousness.

We can best come to the heart of this apparent contradiction when we consider that the Bible tells us that God is just and the justifier of sinners. That God is just means that He ever, only, and always does right. Yet, God is also the justifier of sinners, meaning that the holy God of righteousness freely forgives every sinner who asks for it. Does that seem right? Certainly the Pharisees answered the question with a resounding denial.

The problem is this: what in the world, or more precisely, what in the realm of righteousness would compel God to justify unjust sinners? The answer is: nothing. Hence, if no righteous imperative demands God to justify sinners, it appears that God has done so for no right reason and therefore the God of righteousness has done wrong.

The problem with such reasoning is that it begins at the wrong starting point. In the realm of mere justice or moral right, there is clearly no imperative for God to justify sinners. However, God is not only the God of right but He is also the God of love. It is in love that God determined to justify sinners—even before one of them existed (Eph. 1:4-6). In love God gave His Son as the Savior of sinners (Jn. 3:16) and did so in order that the just requirement of His own holy nature and Law would be satisfied (Rom. 8:3,4). In love Jesus gave Himself for us (Gal. 2:20) so that we might be delivered, not only out of our sins,

but also and especially into the love that obtains between the three persons of the holy Trinity (Jn. 17:23-26).

In God and according to His Word, love and righteousness are inseparable companions. Love without righteousness is mere sentiment; while righteousness without love means condemnation for sinners. But righteousness and love go together in an order where love leads the way. Thus, Jesus sums up the Moral Law not by His saying that we are to obey moral statutes, but by His saying that we are to love God and man. Too often, we reverse the order, with the result that we focus only on whether we do right or wrong. Such perverted order blocks the flourishing of precious, costly, and powerful loving that fulfills all righteousness (Jas. 2:8). So, the question we should first ask ourselves in all situations and in all relationships is not: What is right? But: What is loving? Then we shall love and do so rightly by the grace and to the glory of our God.

Yours in God's love,

William Harrell

April

Loving Motive Solves Moral Dilemmas

Dear Friends,

We are all familiar with those hypothetical situations that are posed to us entailing an apparent clash of Commandments in God's Moral Law. Who has not pondered whether it would have been right for Christians, during World War II, to deceive Nazis as to the whereabouts of Jews the Christians were hiding? Rarely, if ever, do such Christians who actually were in a position to help protect Jews from Nazis concern themselves with such hypothetical questions, for they by their actions have answered the question in one way or another.

Reality has a sobering effect upon our moralizing and costless casuistry. I have had occasion to learn of a real situation where a man acted out his conviction at the cost of his own life but at the intentional gain of the lives of his brothers. In his book, *War and Grace*, author Don Stephens tells of a series of incidents involving Christians in World War II. One such incident involved a work detail of British POW's forced to labor on the railroad that the Japanese were building to use for their planned invasion of India. At Chungkai, Thailand, near the River Kwai, as this work detail was preparing to return to their prison camp, the Japanese guard declared that a shovel was missing and demanded to know who was responsible. When no one confessed, he became enraged and declared that he was going to kill all of the workers. A Scottish believer stepped forward and declared that he was responsible for the missing shovel. He was immediately killed, but with him the killing stopped. When the work detail returned to camp, it was discovered that no shovels were missing. Two things were clear to all involved in this incident: that the Christian had lied and that he had done so to save the lives of his fellow POW's. Not only did the deceiving believer's act save lives, it also sparked a revival among the prisoners at the camp, and bore testimony to the Japanese guards of the saving love of Jesus.

Here was an apparent clash of two of God's Commandments, namely, the Sixth, which forbids killing and enjoins loving regard for the lives of others, and the Ninth, which forbids lying. I have shared this incident with others, asking them whether the man who lied had sinned in his doing of his loving and life-saving deed. Some not only asserted that the self-sacrificing brother had sinned, but also that if they had been in his place they would not have done anything like what he had done. On the other hand, others responded that the man's deed was good, loving, and noble and that if they were in such a situation, they would only hope and pray that their fear of death would not stop them from doing such a life-saving action, however formally imperfect it might have been.

What does the Bible say about the Ninth Commandment, not only in its statement, but more importantly, in its meaning as we can gather it from a consideration of the whole counsel of God? In 1 Samuel 16, God appears to employ equivocation when He tells fearful Samuel to state the reason for his appearance in Bethlehem as his having come to sacrifice and not to disclose his true mission of arriving there to anoint the king to replace Saul. God also employs a stratagem of deceit when He tells Joshua to set an ambush for Ai (Josh. 8:2). Then there is the case of Rahab, who lied to protect the Israelite spies (Josh. 2:3-5). We know we cannot accuse God of sinning in His misleading directives, yet many censure Rahab, despite the fact that there is no condemnation of her in Scripture, but rather repeated commendation (Heb. 11:31; Jas. 2:25).

These examples suggest that there are instances when deception is not in itself a sin. The practice of deception involves two aspects: the communication of something false and an intention to mislead. While it is undeniable that God, Samuel, Rahab, Joshua, and the Israelites at his command, all communicated something less than or other than the truth, we cannot rightly say that they did so because there was a clash between any of God's Commandments when rightly practiced. God, Samuel, Rahab, Joshua, and the Scottish POW all did what they did with good, holy, and loving intention. They misled threatening enemies in order to save lives. The whole truth in all of these examples is that God and His godly people loved others, and were determined to save others. In fact, our Savior misled others when He, by His silence at His trial before Pilate, allowed Himself to be regarded as guilty and deserving of execution. Jesus so delivered Himself up (an apparent violation of the Sixth Commandment, too) because He loved His people and was saving not only their lives but also their souls. He characterized such self-immolation as the greatest love and truest fulfillment of the Law (Jn. 15:13; Mt. 22:36-40).

I am far from saying that love gives us license to lie. I am, however, inclined to feel the force of common sense that accepts within universally understood and accepted conventions that judicious and necessary deception is allowable as a shield in war, as a tool in police work, and as a device used in sports and even in chess. I also know it is best that we allow Scripture, and not our own faulty logic or misinformed consciences, to guide us rightly to understand and to follow our God, His godly ones, and our Lord Jesus, who, incidentally, did good work on the Sabbath even when His opponents thought he was violating the Fourth Commandment. May our minds and hearts grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, so that whatever the situation, we may speak and live the truth in love, to God's glory and for the good of others.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

May

Looking and Seeing

Dear Friends,

About a year ago I noticed an interesting plant springing up near our back patio. Debi and I decided to let it grow and determine whether we wanted to keep it. Soon we realized that what we had was a Mimosa tree. That knowledge brought back a flood of childhood memories for me because Mimosas were common in this area when I was a boy. I thought we had an opportunity to preserve a rare tree. However, I began to notice Mimosas almost everywhere I drove. They had always been there but my renewed acquaintance with the tree had opened my eyes to their existence. When we tried to transplant our Mimosa, it did not survive, and I have not noticed another Mimosa for quite some time.

This little experience has reminded me of Hamlet's words to his friend: There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy. For us, there is infinitely more to our Savior and His salvation than we ever perceive. There are blessings always surrounding us of which we are oblivious because we do not look for them with engaged interest.

Our weak apprehensions of the Lord and His blessings in our lives do not indicate that He is not near to us, blessing us richly at all times. He never leaves or forsakes us (Heb. 13:5). He gives His angels charge over us (Ps. 91:11). His grace for us is sufficient, even in the most painful trials (2 Cor. 12:9). If we do not see our Lord and apprehend his abundant and loving help, it is not because He is nowhere to be found. Instead, we need better to employ the power of perception our Lord has given us.

How can we perceive more clearly the nearness and blessing of our God? The one power of spiritual perception our Lord had graciously given to all of His children is faith. But we can easily slip or be distracted into relying on our own sight and our own understanding in our endeavors to see our God. Therefore, we must ever pray that our Lord open the eyes of our hearts so that we might behold wonders and treasures of our redemption in His Word (Ps. 119:18; Eph. 1:18ff). Then, through the spectacles of God's Word, we will look for and see our God ever, only, and always being lovingly near us in the world and working ever, only, and always for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Sometimes, however, our prayers are offered to God but not followed through by ourselves. When we ask the Lord to open our eyes to behold Him, we should understand that He reveals Himself to us when we ask, seek, and knock after Him with all of our hearts (Jer. 29:13; Matt. 7:7). It was my lively interest in the Mimosa that made me see many of them all around me. My interest did not create all those trees, but without such interest, I was and now again am oblivious to their abundant reality. May we all have a more constant, vital, and loving interest in our God so that we may see and not be oblivious to His great, precious, and loving promises and provision.

Yours, learning better to see,

William Harrell

June

Honor and Aging

Dear Friends,

I recently heard of a person nearing the age of thirty expressing a dread of getting old. It is common in our youth-oriented culture for people to feel and to express a sense of horror at the thought of their aging. Of course it is understandable that all people would prefer not to weaken physically and to be compelled by the decaying of the outer man to bear increasing burdens of pain and debilitation. It is true that there are many and precious consolations that accompany the aging process, but in a youth-obsessed society, many fail to seek, find, and enjoy them. I believe that one special factor increases the dread that the young sense at the thought of their getting old. It is the failure of so many to obey the Fifth Commandment, wherein the Lord directs His people to honor their fathers and mothers. According to the Word of God, the aged are to be honored, while according to our culture, the very thought of one's ageing inspires a sense of horror in both young and old.

The Lord's Commandment that we honor our parents implies an honoring of our superiors, not an honoring of those who have simply preceded us in life. It is right that we honor those older than we are. Although there are foolish and evil older people, who have failed or refused to profit from the experience of their years, such people were foolish and evil in their youth. The wicked are rightly despised whatever their age may be. However, many people, in fact most people, and the vast majority of all Christians, improve with age.

While it is the strength of a young man that is his glory, it is the gray hair of the older man that is his glory (Prov. 20:29). Specifically, it is those who have attained the emblems of old age through their growth in the grace, knowledge, and righteousness of the Lord (Prov. 16:31) that have glorious virtues to be recognized and honored by the young. While the young man acts with strength and speed, because he lacks the knowledge of many facts and the wisdom that rightly and virtuously correlates those facts, he tends to act in faulty and even destructive fashion until he is taught and learns to do better. In this respect, the Word of God regards the young, not the aged, to labor under the greater defect. The Book of Proverbs, for example, abounds with teaching for the young and naïve with intention of eliminating the juvenile defects of ignorance and inexperience. Elders do not always make wise and virtuous decisions or do honorable deeds, but expansive knowledge, practical wisdom, depth and warmth of love, and, indeed, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in its sweet ripeness are rarely to be found in the young and inexperienced. Scripture tells us to give honor only to those to whom it is due (Rom. 13:7). Therefore, when we are told by God to honor those superior to us in age, gifts, and graces, we are being told to do a right and reasonable thing.

The Fifth Commandment also commends to us an attitude and a way of actions that bless and please both the children who honor their parents and the parents who are honored by their children. It goes without saying that disrespectful, cynical, and mocking children are a grief to any parent. Yet, it is

profitably pointed out to us by the Apostle Paul that there is a promise of blessing given to those who seek to obey the Fifth Commandment (Eph. 6:2). That promise is not simply that the children who honor their parents would live long, but also that they would live well as they dwell within the blessed sweetness and security of the kingdom of God's grace and love (Ex. 20:12). Therefore, it is with children and their elders as it is with husbands and their wives. The husband who loves his wife will be so blessedly rewarded in the endeavor that he can rightly be said to love himself (Eph. 5:28). So it can rightly be said that the youth who honors his elders will find that he also honors himself. This will be so not only because the giving of honor to our superiors is right, good, and seemly, but also because as a given generation of young people honor their parents, they will set an example for their children to follow and so serve to create a climate of mutual, loving respect.

Into such a climate, no young person need fear to enter. For when he is old he will be honored by his children as he has honored his father and mother. He will mount up not by his own weakening arms, but with wings of graciousness, wisdom, patience, kindness, love, and growing Christ-likeness. When he looks at his decaying outer man, he will perceive through that fading façade his true, inner man growing in grace and glory. And when he looks at other believers of his generation, he will perceive their inner glory, too, and pity the carnal and superficial, whether they be young or old, who are blinded to the excellencies of character and sweet ripeness in grace that grow within his contemporary brethren.

The youth have a God-given duty to honor their elders. The elders in Christ, who have grown in the grace and knowledge of the Lord and who are nourished on the means of God's grace by their deep and keen spiritual appetites, whereby they have tasted and seen the goodness of the Lord for many years, have a responsibility also. They are lovingly to show their juniors the delights of those who are mature in Christ, so that together they may run the race set before them with sure confidence, growing gratitude, and abounding joy.

Yours having given some, but now receiving much honor in the Lord,

William Harrell

July

Love: Blessed Fruit of New Life

Dear Friends,

I recently had the opportunity to share with an unbeliever how I was converted to Christ. Some have enjoyed the privilege of having been raised by Christian parents and cannot recall a time in their lives when they did not trust Christ for their salvation. I have had the privilege of experiencing the saving grace of God as an adult, having spent years in the vanity and pride of sin and then coming clearly and decisively from that sin into new life in Christ. I told my friend how I had been attending Bible studies at a U.S. Air Force base chapel where I was stationed in the early 1970's. I came to the point of realizing that while I had acknowledged the existence of God (or at times merely the possibility of His existence), I had never trusted Him vitally and practically. So one night, I cried out to God, asking Him to show

Himself to me in a way that would win my trust. Although my friend is an unbeliever, even he thought my prayer was not very reverent or theological. Of course, he was right. But, as I explained to him, I have since then learned that God is not concerned with formal orthodoxy so much as with the genuine cry of a man's heart and soul. My friend asked me how God answered my prayer, and I told him that the Lord simply, profoundly, and lastingly changed me. God did what no man or agency could ever do, He gave me a new heart and soul!

To this day, nearly 40 years after my prayer and its answer, I am still amazed and delighted at how the Lord did and continues to do for me exceeding abundant beyond what I asked or thought. But how did I know I had a new heart and soul, that I was a new man by the marvelous working of the saving grace and power of God? That answer is one of the most simple and clear ones I can give: I became a man who loved others. I had been self-centered, but God changed me into a man who began to love Him and to love people. This loving, although I still do it very imperfectly, has become the greatest blessing of my Christian life, second only to God's love for me.

As I grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, I come less and less to question or doubt His love for me. I accept it with increasingly profound gratitude as the nourishing food, healing medicine, and liberating light of my soul. Therefore, I spend less time asking God to prove His love for me, and I spend more time asking Him to make me a better lover of Him and the people in my life.

It is in the exercise of such love, however difficult and sacrificial it may become, that I find a blessedness that I could not experience were I to be merely a recipient of love, even of God's love. This is so because God's love does not have the character of terminating with those who receive it. The love of God impels those who truly know and possess it to love others.

This loving of others makes the living of the Christian life to be both sweet and simple. As the love Jacob had for Rachel made the years of his service to her father pass quickly and sweetly, so the love the Lord gives us to have for and demonstrate to others transforms all cost and sacrifice involved in our giving such love into blessedness for us. In Galatians 4:15, Paul equates supreme blessedness with supremely sacrificial service. The Galatians were most blessed when they were lovingly committed to giving their own eyes to relieve Paul's affliction. This can only be true if such loving service is rooted and grounded in the infinitely sacrificial and saving love that God has for us (Eph. 3:14-19). If we are so rooted, love issues from us as the natural fruit of God's Holy Spirit, not as the artificial and exhausting works of man.

The simplicity of this is in our asking in every situation and with every person one question: What is the loving thing to do? We do not need to manipulate factors or persons in any situation in order for us to love others in those situations. We do not need to wait until others seem to us worthy of our love, nor do we need to fear that our loving will impose loss upon us, when it will only prove to be for us a greater blessing to give such holy love to others than to receive anything else in all the world.

Yours, learning to love,

William Harrell

August

Our Perfection in Love

Dear Friends,

Our Lord Jesus tells us that we are to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48). How are we to understand these words? Is Jesus being prescriptive or descriptive? If the former is the case, then our Lord is telling us to work until we attain sinless perfection; if the latter is intended, then He is simply predicting and even promising to us the personal and perpetual perfection which shall be ours in glory (1 Cor. 15:51-53; Rev. 22:1-5). Whether or not our Lord is speaking in Matthew 5:48 about our attaining sinless perfection either here and now by our faithful appropriation of His enabling grace, or hereafter as we are transformed into glorious perfection at the last and eternally enduring day, it is clear that our Lord is referring to our perfection in love. The context of v.48 (especially vv.43-47) makes it very clear that we can be perfected in loving resemblance to our heavenly Father here and now, at least in seminal form (vv.44,45), as well as fully and perfectly in glory.

Our right understanding of this radically reorients our thinking, feeling, speaking, and acting, as well as our intentions and purposes. Instead of our living, moving, and having our being in the realm only of moral principles and imperatives, we find that Jesus has set us squarely in the world of people, all of them imperfect and some of them desperately so (cf., our enemies in v.44), telling us not that we are to mount in our thoughts and attain by our deeds a complex understanding and perfect fulfillment of the manifold articulations of the Moral Law, but rather that we are to be prompted and empowered by the growing love we have for our neighbors.

Although the Moral Law issues from and manifests to us the holy character of our God, it is not the case that our God consults His own promulgation of the Law to determine the course of His own actions. Rather, He who is love sovereignly acts in love to choose and redeem a people for Himself (Eph. 1:4-6), and prompted by His holy love He acts with fruitful effect to save His beloved and chosen ones without violation of but rather in perfect conformity with His moral perfection. Similarly, we who have the love of our Father implanted within us as the fruit of His indwelling Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22,23), grow increasingly to view the manifold facets of God's Moral Law not as goals for our attainment, but rather as guides and channels for our love.

If we understand the words of Jesus regarding our perfection to have prescriptive reference to our dutiful fulfillment of the Moral Law, we shall find ourselves succeeding not in fulfilling the Moral Law, but rather in reducing ourselves into increasingly miserable and misery-causing perfectionists whose exacting demands can never be satisfied. The perfectionist will never understand or accept the graciously provided justification Christ has wrought for those who have faith in Him. Perfectionists will always suspect that justification is a lure to draw them into the ironclad contract to obey God perfectly in their own power. Perfectionists will always view sanctification not as the unpacking and progressive application of the treasure of an inherited holiness, but rather as an arduous trek toward an unattainable and increasingly unimaginable personal perfection. Those who are perfectionists do not become perfect in the loving way that our heavenly Father is perfect. They do not cover others' sins, but

delight to expose them (Prov. 10:12; 1 Pet. 4:8), even as the cursed sons of Noah exposed their father's sin (Gen. 9:20-27). Perfectionists are not patient, kind, humble, bearers, believers, hoppers, and endurers of all things (1 Cor. 13:4-7) the way that holy lovers are, for they are too driven to fix not on true perfection but upon the ceaseless streams of imperfection issuing from themselves and others.

This day we cannot, except in terms of the imputed righteousness of Christ, be regarded as perfect fulfillers of the Moral Law of God. However, when we love others with the genuine reflections of the love we have received from God in Christ, we are regarded by God and man as ones who are fulfilling the royal law of love (Jas. 2:8), for such love has the power to cover even the defects of its own imperfections, as it shines brightly not to expose sins but to reveal the glory of God in His loving cleansing of all the sins of His people through the person and work of His beloved Son.

Yours growing in His loving perfection,

William Harrell

September

Fruit Blossoming in the Desert

Dear Friends,

It is natural for us to take pleasure in the obvious and pleasant blessings of the Lord and to dread and do all we can to avoid being delivered from His more dark and painful providences. It is natural for us to expect and even to demand only the pleasant blessings while holding the trying times in contempt, but it is not in accord with our new natures or the resources we have in Christ. The truth is that our Lord does some of His best and most fruitful work in the dark and painful dungeons, fiery furnaces, and hostile deserts of our lives.

Rightly do we read and find comfort in the passages of God's Word that tell us how the Lord will make the desert blossom fruitfully (Isa. 35:1; 51:3). Yet, we can fail adequately to understand that the deserts of our lives are brought about by our Lord's ordaining and doing. They are brought about precisely to achieve the conditions that will be most conducive to the production of the fruitfulness that only He can cause in such adverse environments.

In these days of widespread economic woes, our nation and others that have been historically Christian are economically sinking while non-Christian lands such as China and India are rising. We also are going through political upheavals in our land while the culture of our nation continues to disintegrate. The Church in our land is in upheaval, and many places where gospel light had in days past shined brightly are growing dark. A common temptation for believers in such situations is to dread the days of diminishment and long for the sunny days of yore. Yet, we need not fear the formation of a moral, spiritual, social, economic, political, and cultural desert in our land. We may grieve over the diminishment, and we must pray about it, but times like ours especially call for us to remember and rely

on the fact that our God causes some of His most fragrant flowers and fruitful trees to flourish in the desert.

Think of the glorious prophecies of that great and faithful servant of the Lord, Isaiah. Nowhere in the Bible do we find more profound, clear, and glorious visions of our God and His redeeming work than we do in the writings of that prophet (e.g., Isa. 53). Yet, Isaiah labored in a day of rapid national and ecclesiastical decline, rot, and rebellion. Similarly, the prophet Jeremiah lived to see the death of Judah as a nation and the captivity of her remnants in Babylon and yet he perceived and wrote of the new covenant and new humanity with vibrancy that is unsurpassed in Scripture (Jer. 24:7; 31:31-34). The exilic prophet Ezekiel also did the same (Ezek. 36:25-27).

These great servants of the Lord may have constituted a miniscule minority in their day, and they and their contemporaries may have regarded their work as futile and fruitless, but it was precisely because their times were so dark and the hearers and heeders of their messages were so few that they recorded their visions for the blessing of the Church in all future ages. These men and others like them were vibrant and life-giving fruit trees blossoming in the deserts of their times but bearing fruit in the ages thereafter.

In more personal terms, the Apostle Paul tells us of the fruitful connection between affliction and the production of glory. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, he writes of our momentary, light afflictions producing for us an incomparable weight of glory. It is when we lose sight of this connection that we dread abasing times; it is to the extent that we perceive and trust in that vital connection that we know and are comforted by the truth that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. For when we read of what great use our God makes of the deserts He ordains, and look for and believe that He is preparing for us greater blessing through our tribulations than we could ever have without such trials, then we can bless the Lord who makes marvelous His lovingkindness to us in a besieged city (Ps. 31:21).

The Word of God makes clear to us that the gospel is to be ministered and lived out during times when it is in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:1-5). While we may not delight in the times of winter cold and desert dryness, we may find comfort in the sure hope that the Lord is doing His fruitful work in such times. What great and fruitful servants of the Lord are being fashioned by God in the places of spiritual wilderness in our day? What graces are being deepened and nurtured through the pruning times of trial in our lives in these days? We shall one day see the beauty of spiritual fruit blossoming even in our deserts, and have cause to marvel at and rejoice in the Lord's doings in conditions we never would have chosen.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

October

Christ Our Bridegroom

Beloved Brethren,

In Luke 20:35, our Lord Jesus declares that in the resurrection life to come we will neither marry nor give in marriage. This statement is profound, mysterious, and wonderful, and from it we may glean much about life to come.

We know that redemption is the re-creative work of God in Christ. All of those in Christ Jesus are made a new creation (II Corinthians 5:17). We are born again unto newness of life (John 3:1ff; Romans 6:4). Indeed, the entirety of God's original creation, cleansed by fire, will be renewed and remade (Revelation 21:5; Romans 8:21-23). Therefore, we may look back at the original creation and all the original blessings and form some idea of the re-creation to come. Rightly do we insist that the creation God has already made our God will neither lose nor give over entirely to evil nor simply destroy for lack of transformative power to save it. Once God has begun a work, He never loses or forfeits or forsakes that work. Part of the glory of the victory to come is the redemption of the entire created order.

However, if we stopped at that point, we would fall far short of what the Scripture teaches us regarding the resurrected world. When our Lord Jesus Christ declares that in the resurrection world we will neither marry nor be given in marriage, He is saying something very significant about how the re-creation differs from the original creation. In the original creation, even before the Fall of man, Adam and Eve enjoyed a marriage relationship. They enjoyed it precisely because it was God's good provision and blessing for their lives. In fact, marrying and giving in marriage was a creation mandate God gave to mankind in order to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1:22, 28). Therefore, marriage was a blessed part of God's original creation. Yet, in the afterlife, marriage will no longer exist. Why? How can this be? What does this mean?

It means not that the resurrection life will be less blessed but, rather, that it will be even more blessed than the original creation! It means that the divine blessings of the resurrected world will eclipse the blessings of the original, "very good" creation. Now, clearly, even the good and very good creation of God can be improved upon by God. It was morally perfect. The design, as far it extended, was perfect. Nonetheless, even God Himself, after creating Adam as very good, stated that it was "not good" for Adam to be alone, creating Eve for him (Genesis 2:18ff). Even God, after declaring His creation to be very good added the blessing of the Covenant relationship (Genesis 2:15ff). Therefore, as God Himself demonstrated at the very beginning, even His original creation—as perfect as it was and as far as it went in making blessed provision for mankind—could be improved upon! Even God's very good creation could have blessings added to it. Thus, when we read that the marriage relationship no longer exists in the re-created world, we are led to understand something of the remarkable addition of blessings that we will discover there. So surpassingly glorious will the new creation be that even the most intimate and blessed human relationship in the original creation will simply be eclipsed and evaporate in light of the manifest glory fully experienced in the consummated Kingdom of God!

Yet, how can such things be when the original creation is so marred and warped by the Fall of mankind?! When God declares that He works all things for our good, He does not lie! For that even includes the original Fall of mankind into sin—the Fall that plunged the entire human race into darkness and

continues to plague the very ground today. That Fall of mankind became the portal God opens to even greater blessedness for those who are in Christ Jesus. The world would never have known to the degree it does the love of God. For the love of God is pre-eminently manifested in the incarnate Word, the Lamb of God Who came to give His life as a ransom for many. The world would never even have known or experienced the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. What need is there for mercy (not condemning but pardoning) when no sins exists to be pardoned? What opportunity would exist to manifest mercy when no sin existed?

Especially, however, in order to discover the more precise reason even marriage is eclipsed, consider that, without the Fall, Jesus Christ would never have been our Covenant Head (Romans 5; I Corinthians 15). We would, rather, have been under Adam as our covenant head. That is to say, we would never have been united to our Lord Jesus by faith. He would never have been our righteousness. We would never have been comprehended by God in Him. We could never be described as Christ's Body. We would never have had such an intimate unity with Jesus Christ as we now are already enjoying. In other words, Jesus Christ would never have been our Husband as He is now considered! Yet, since the Fall of mankind and God's supreme demonstration of love in sending Jesus Christ to us, we learn that: "the two shall become one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the Church" (Ephesians 5:31-32)! Brethren, we are the new creation bathed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ! That precious blood procures for us something much more precious, of surpassingly greater value, than even the original creation! The infinitely precious and everlastingly powerful blood Jesus Christ procured for us God's most intimate love to be lavished upon His Bride as never before unto all eternity!

Indeed, beloved brethren, the primary reason the new creation has no marriage relationship between a mere man and a mere woman is this: Jesus Christ is the only needed Husband! The satisfaction, enjoyment, and pleasure we will find in our most intimate relationship with Jesus Christ as our Husband eclipses the blessing of any other such marriage relationship! There is simply no room for it. There is simply no reason for it. There is no purpose it could serve that our marriage to the Lamb does not already abundantly fulfill! Brethren, since these things are so, what astonishingly wonderful manner of blessedness awaits us?! What pleasures, incomprehensible to us now, must await us there?! The contemplation of such things is enough to take your breath away in the marvel of the surpassing blessedness that awaits! Let us not fail to meditate upon such things. Let us not fail to marvel in excited anticipation of the glory that is to come!

Your servant under Christ,

Ryan Speck

November

Improving Our Communication

Dear Friends,

Recently a number of us were blessed by a one-day seminar on communication led by our brother, Cron Gibson, Executive Director for Hope Well Ministries. The theme of that seminar spurred my reconsideration of the place and importance of good communication in all of our relationships, and I intend to share some aspects of my reconsideration with you in this letter.

I begin with a consideration of what we have to communicate. In the final analysis, it is what our hearts contain that determines what we possess to share with others. James reminds us that a fountain can only send out the kind of water it contains, either fresh or salty (Jas. 3:9-12). The hearts of all who are unregenerate are full of deception and murder. That is why Adam donned his fig leaf covering, and why those who have been born only once hide themselves not only physically but also emotionally. What they have to communicate is shameful, misleading, and injurious. They therefore communicate poorly because what they have to communicate is essentially shameful and evil.

Those who have been regenerated by God in Christ have something radically different to communicate. They have the truth and love of the Lord. They know the truth of Christ and it has set them free; they know the love of God in Christ and that prompts and empowers them to love others.

However, even the redeemed must still contend with the remnants of their once dominating sin. Unless we continually apply to ourselves the righteousness and compassion of Christ, we will become easily entangled in sin and fearfully cover ourselves from rather than communicate with others.

Although we may have truth and love in our hearts, we still must concern ourselves with how we communicate our feelings and thoughts to others. Here we tend to become complacent in accordance with our own temperaments rather than being diligently considerate of how others might perceive the message and manner of our communications. For example, men tend to feel more comfortable thinking and speaking of the truth, while women tend to think of and express love. Accordingly, the Word of God speaks in a way to balance these weighted dispositions, telling husbands not so much to teach their wives the truth as to embrace them in love, while wives are directed to consider and accept the truth that Scripture has called them to be subject to their husbands as a part of their loving obedience to the Lord (Eph. 5:21-33). In practical terms, this means that husbands and wives must not presume to speak and expect to be heard in each one's own language, but rather that each must learn to speak and hear in the language of the other.

This matter of one's thinking, speaking, acting, and hearing the truth in love is essential for all who are in Christ, not just for those who are married. We do well to understand our need to train ourselves clearly to communicate with others in ways that they can best understand. This not only facilitates our communication of truth but also manifests our loving consideration for those to whom we speak. The alternative is that we assume we are speaking clearly because we clearly understand what we are saying. If those to whom we are speaking indicate that they do not understand us, we then conclude that they do not want to hear and heed the truth we are speaking. Therefore, instead of our working to make ourselves understood, we put the burden on the other to decipher our code. What is clearly and rightly communicated by this way of expressing ourselves is that we have little loving consideration for those to whom we are speaking.

There are other defects and inadequacies that can mar our communications and the relationships that are fostered or damaged by them. We can, for example, get locked into the right/wrong argumentative mode of communication. This is when we assert that not only our principled convictions (against stealing, for instance), but also our personal preferences (for comedy rather than dramatic T.V.) hold the moral high ground against all others. Such attitudes reduce communication to arguments and adversarial stances that smother love. The language of love does not bristle with imposing and directive missiles that are employed to defend one's position, but rather is warmly open to exploring how in right and holy ways we may sacrifice our own desires as love gifts to the delight of those who are objects of our love.

However, good communication is not a one-way proposition; it is a matter of true and loving exchange between parties. This means that we must excel not only in clear speaking of truth and love, but also in our lovingly discerning hearing. If we close our ears to what others are trying to say to us, it reveals to them our closed hearts. If our consideration of what others are trying to say to us is clouded with our skeptical and contemptuous attitudes, we discourage others from being transparent with us and drive them away from us.

When we have opportunity to listen to others, we should be slow to speak even to ourselves within our own minds. Instead, we should be eager and respectfully expectant to hear truth, love, and helpful wisdom coming from them. Very often our expectations considerably color the character of what we hear from others. Those expecting faults and folly claim to find what they expect, whereas those expecting loving truth and wisdom seem to find at least some degree of it in what others are saying to them. Of course, if we are listening with the judgment of charity and still sense that we are receiving less than true and loving communication from one who is speaking to us, we should with loving respect tell that one what we think we are hearing from him, then ask him if that was what he meant to convey. It is amazing how often the speaker will then modify his words and manner into greater fidelity with the truth and love he was trying, however poorly, to share. Thus, we grow together in holy love.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

December

The Wonder of Our Being Wrong

Dear Friends,

Rarely do we welcome the discovery that we are wrong about something we hold to be true. This is understandable when the reality that eventually is imposed on our fantasies is more grim and painful than what we had firmly held to be true. When a young person weaves for himself a mythology that adult life for him will be more fun and easy than his serious and boringly responsible parents have sought to impress upon him, he does not delight to face the truth that he was more wrong and his parents more right about adult life than he had anticipated. No adult enjoys discovering that his car or

his own body is in need of serious and costly repairs. The bitterness of these discoveries of mistaken apprehension can and often does run more deeply than to the reasonable level of disappointment. Such bitterness can run to despairing depths.

It is natural that we should feel this way, but it is not feeling that accords with our new natures in Christ or with our new relationship with our saving God who loves us and causes all things to work for our good. The fact is that we who have emerged from death into life and from darkness into the light of God's kingdom should expect to find ourselves wrong and to be contradicted by the truth more frequently than we might anticipate. This fact is not one that should grieve us, as though we sinners had the best reading on reality and hold upon bright prospects when we were dead in our sin. The contradictions that we receive from our God and His Word do not rob us of enriching and enjoyable possessions and prospects, but rather are more like the unwinding of the grave cloths that had bound the corpse of the risen Lazarus in his tomb. We do well not to worry but gratefully to wonder when our wrong apprehensions about anything are contradicted by the liberating truth of God.

A faithful ministry of the Word should regularly contradict our wrongs in attitude and action. That is why Paul characterizes such a ministry in the corrective terms of reproof, rebuke, and exhortation (2 Tim. 4:2). This is not bad news but is good news that accords with the glorious gospel. We are emerging from the realm of our wrong and inadequate notions of our Lord and His salvation. His contradictions are not the oppressive blows of a pompous and accusatory pedant. They are the steps by which we are guided lovingly by our Father into the truth that sets us free. If this is so, we should rejoice to discover every one of our wrongs rather than to dread the exchanging of them for that which is right, good, empowering, and most deeply satisfying.

Our fears are wrong. That is why Jesus tells us so regularly not to fear. He is not demanding that we be courageous in face of danger; He is telling us that there is no danger! Our sorrows are wrong. This does not mean that we should not feel them, but rather that we should not resist allowing the great and precious promises of God's Word to sweeten our sorrows with hope that does not disappoint because it is based on the incomparable glory that is to be revealed to and even in us. Our doubts are wrong. Our Lord consistently demonstrated to His disciples how much greater His wisdom, power, and love were than they had thought or imagined.

Do we not, when we rightly survey our Christian lives, look back with relief and rejoicing to find that we have been so wrong about so many things we have believed and sought to convince others to believe? Have we not been like the paralyzed man by Bethesda's pool, arguing with the Lord with strong conviction that our lot could not improve because of all the factors we perceived working against us? And have we not rejoiced to experience the wonder of finding a blessed contradiction to our misgivings, wrought by the hand and compassionate heart of our God for our good?

We are wrong, dear friends and brethren, more often than we realize. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ we come to see this, and far from our sorrowing over it, we should rejoice in the growing discovery and increasing expectation that our worst fears are unfounded, our doubts are baseless, our sorrows are but the passing night's prelude to everlasting joy in the morning. Our

discoveries of our wrong thoughts about and feelings toward our Lord and His providence will lead us from being like the disciples on the stormy sea, wherein they thought that Jesus lacked sufficient sense and sensitivity to perish with them. We will be filled with wonder and worship when we discover that what is true and right is that Jesus has love and power to still all storms and to save us from perishing and to make us to be in Him more than conquerors in all things. Let us not cleave to our wrongs but gladly surrender them and hold our good and giving God in ever growing reverence with boundless rejoicing that we have been wrong and that the truth is greater and more glorious than we had ever thought or imagined.

Yours increasingly in wonder,

William Harrell