

Judgments of Charity and Condemnation

Dear Friends,

Our Lord Jesus tells us that we should not judge others (Mt. 7:1). By this He means not that we are prohibited from evaluating the words and works of others, but rather that we must resist the temptation to be censorious and condemning in our assessments of others. To this prohibition, Jesus adds the warning that if we do judge by a condemning standard, we shall be judged by that same standard (Mt. 7:2). We are to consider others by the judgment of charity, rather than by the judgment of cynical condemnation. By the former standard, we place the best credible construction upon the words, actions, and even the motives of others. By the latter standard, we place the most sinister construction upon others' attitudes and actions. The intention and result of our exercising the judgment of charity is the loving edification of others; the intention and result of our exercising the judgment of condemnation is the tearing down of others. It should, therefore, be obvious to us why the God who is love commends the one standard and condemns the other.

We do well to discern the true character of these opposite standards of judgment. There are counterfeit versions of both the judgment of charity and the judgment of condemnation. A counterfeit judgment of charity is essentially an indulgence whereby one refuses to perceive and deal lovingly and restoratively with sin in his brother. While true charity does not rejoice to find sin in another, it does not turn a blind eye to such sin, but rather seeks to win one's brother out of it. True charity prompts us to speak the truth in love so that others are released from their miserable bondage to life-destroying sin and are built up in Christ.

The judgment of condemnation has its counterfeits as well. But here the counterfeits are guises of righteousness and love that are donned to make the judgment of condemnation appear good, right, and necessary. For example, a cynical, condemning man may convince himself that he is in fact a person of great spiritual discernment who perceives sin in others that a less discerning brother may fail to perceive. Such a condemning one may further fancy himself to be righteously compelled to confront the sinner with proclamation of just judgment, rather than point him to the forgiving grace of the Lord.

Behind the judgment of condemnation is one's motivation not lovingly to edify others in Christ, but lovelessly to tear them down. The loveless one does this in an endeavor to exalt himself. But his sense of exaltation is delusive, for the cynicism he exercises is that not of a divinely motivated person, but rather that of a dog. In fact, the noun, *cynic*, comes from the Greek word meaning *dog*.

The condemning cynic surrounds others not with loving embrace, but with snarling no-win attacks aimed at tearing others down. For example, the cynic views the weak, struggling believer not as a bruised reed to be tenderly nurtured to healing and strength, but simply as a loser to be cast away. The condemning cynic, at the same time, views the strong and victorious believer not as an encouraging example of the Lord's enabling grace being operative in one's life, but rather as a hypocrite who projects himself as being better than he truly is. Even if the hypocrite label cannot be made to stick, even if a brother's undeniable integrity shines forth, the cynic attributes such integrity to an easy course of untested indulgence that the one having such integrity has had the good fortune to experience. Hence, the struggling believer is cast off as a loser, while the strong believer is cast off as a cheater. In the world of the cynic there are no winners, no healing of wounds, no forgiveness or deliverances, no resurrections; there are only worthless souls worthy of condemnation which the cynic smugly delights to rain upon such souls.

It is a terrible thing when one exercises the judgment of condemnation. For by his doing so,

while he may distress his brethren, he does not succeed in destroying them—their heavenly Advocate sees to that. Meanwhile, the cynic busies himself emptying his life of all human relationships, and depriving himself of vital communion with the God of covenant love and saving grace. Let us, therefore, with constant vigilance, ask our Lord to search us and show us if we are to any degree failing to exercise the sweet, embracing, and edifying judgment of charity. Let us cry to Him to show us if we are to any degree exercising the bitter, repulsive, destructive judgment of condemnation, and let us ask Him to grant us the grace of repentance from it if it is to any extent an active principle in our lives.

Yours striving to grow in charity,

William Harrell

Renounce False Faith

Dear Friends,

[Several weeks ago at the conclusion of the Sunday morning sermon, I was led to issue an exhortation that was no less sobering, if not shocking, to me than it proved to be for all of those who heard it. A rather large number to those who heard it asked if I would reduce the exhortation to writing, and I am persuaded that my doing so may serve for the benefit of any who might read it. What follows, therefore, is a somewhat revised version of what I said in the sermon.]

I want at this time to issue a call to you, with all of the sincerity of my heart and with a full realization of the gravity of the words I am about to express. This call goes in particular to you children and young people of believing parents who have not yet come to faith in Christ yourselves. It also goes out to all who bear the name of Christian as an appeal for serious and prayerful reflection upon your calling and election.

Children, I am sure that you have been encouraged by your parents to come to faith in the Lord Jesus. All of their prayers and instruction and the example they seek to set for you of faithful living are intended to lead you to trust in the Lord Jesus for your salvation as soon as possible. However, I want to say to you that while what you have heard and seen in your parents and in others who pray for your conversion is true and right and good, you must not rush into making a profession of faith in Jesus before you truly possess Jesus by faith. The Bible tells us that it is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31), and so it is, if one does not have a true, saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. For without Christ's righteousness covering us, we come to God full of our sin which He hates with a burning righteous wrath.

Some of you may well have made formal though faithless professions of saving trust in the Lord Jesus. If that is the case with anyone in this flock, I appeal to you to make your calling and election sure as soon as possible, or else I appeal to you to be honest and renounce your so-called faith. If you say that you trust Jesus, when you do not, you are of all people in the world most to be pitied. I say this because God is gracious to the just and to the unjust. He causes His blessings of common grace to fall upon the unregenerate, while He lavishes His blessings of redemptive grace upon those who have truly been born of His Spirit. But if you say that you have been born of the Spirit when you have in fact never been made a new creature in Christ, you put yourself under the chastisements of the Lord and can expect to find none of His comforts.

Paul tells the Corinthians that because many of them were partaking of the Lord's Supper in an unworthy manner, some of them were sick and some had even died (1 Cor. 11:29,30). Your elders in Immanuel have noted with grief and increasing weariness the rise of serious afflictions and the increase in the number of discipline cases that have occurred since we instituted a weekly administration of the Lord's Supper. By no means am I saying that all of the afflictions result from the unworthy partaking of that holy ordinance by those so afflicted in our midst. Yet, the connection seems to be not entirely coincidental, but rather to some extent causal.

Are any of you suffering now? Could it be that for some of you the suffering, the burdens, the miseries in your lives result from your taking upon yourselves the name of Christ without really having faith in Him? If so, you must repent. You may repent in either of two and only two ways. You may believe truly and vitally in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. Then you will have the enabling power of God dwelling in you by the Holy Spirit, and you will have a new nature that truly hungers and thirsts for righteousness, instead of the one you now have that honors the Lord with your lips, while your heart is far from Him.

You may also repent by renouncing your faith in Christ, if yours is in fact a counterfeit faith. I

assure you that your afflictions will lessen and your burdens will lighten if you do this. Why should you miss out on the blessings of the Lord's common grace in this life? If you are not truly a Christian, you are not equipped to feed upon the delights of saving grace; your constitution is fit only for the transient pleasures of this life. What is to stop you from ceasing the religious hypocrisy and seizing the provision of common grace that is all you really want and all that the Lord intends for you to have in this life? Surely you do not halt between a consistent and committed faith and a consistent and committed faithlessness because you fear God's judgment and hell. If you are without saving faith in the Lord, you do not believe in God, neither in heaven nor hell. So, I appeal to all who waver between faith and unbelief—choose this day whom you will serve, and at least have done with your hypocrisy and be relieved from the misery that you experience due to the hand of God's judgment that falls upon such hypocrisy in this life prior to the day of His final judgment.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Fear Not

Dear Friends,

Both Scripture and sanctified experience teach us that our Lord is a most sympathetic High Priest (Heb. 4:15,16). Because our Redeemer has been tempted in all ways as we are, He can understand as a Man the pressures of our temptations and sympathize accordingly with us. It is, however, remarkable that there is not a single instance recorded in Scripture where our God demonstrates any sympathy for or toleration of those who succumb to the pressures of fears. This fact is highly significant, telling us that our Lord has no tolerance for our indulgence of the fears and even anxieties that play so prominently in our lives and pressure us to make all sorts of decisions under their dark and malignant influence. Does this mean that the Lord does not care about us when we are filled with fears or that He is incapable of vanquishing our fears?

The absolute absence of any divine sympathy for those in fear speaks neither of our Lord's callous insensitivity to our plight, nor of His incompetence to help us when we find ourselves in the throes of terrors. What it does speak of is the amazing reality that our God in Christ has removed all cause we had to be afraid, while we were in the guilt, bondage, and degradation of our sins. The perfect love and saving power of God, demonstrated in the redeeming death of His Son, have cast all fears out of the lives of all who are in Christ.

Rather than divine sympathy for us when we fearfully regard those things that attempt to strike fear in us, what our Lord does give to us when we are filled with fear is ever and only the same thing: a simple and strong command that we stop fearing. The cause He gives us to cease our fearing is that He has given Himself to us as our shield and reward (Gen.15:1). We therefore unnecessarily and ungratefully refuse Him who speaks to us from heaven's glorious throne if we persist in our fears when, in fact, we have no cause to do so (Heb. 12:25).

Our fears may seem reasonable to us. We see threatening circumstances as the servant of Elisha beheld the Syrian soldiers surrounding the city with proud intention and apparently abundant power to arrest the prophet (2 Ki. 6:15). Yet we must perversely and ungratefully rely on our own understanding and refuse to trust in the promises and power of our heavenly Father if we take counsel of our fears. When we exercise faith and trust in the Lord with all our hearts (Prov. 3:5,6), the eyes of our hearts will be opened to behold that greater are the heavenly hosts and divine resources that are for us than are those puny and vaunting foes that are against us (2 Ki. 6:16,17).

In Psalm 37, we are told of the things we should be doing instead of indulging our fears. That Psalm was written by David, who knew from experience that not even a well-equipped giant who was experienced and skilled at killing his foes could strike fear in one who was clothed in the name of the Lord (1 Sam. 17:45-47). David tells us that in place of our fears we should trust in the Lord, do good, dwell in the place where God has put us, exercise and nurture our faith, delight ourselves in the Lord, gratefully accept His giving to us the desires of our hearts, commit our way to the Lord, and trust Him to lead us, empower us, and enable us wisely, boldly, and triumphantly to be more than conquerors over all things and beings that would endeavor to attack us as we walk in the way of the Lord (Ps. 37:3-5). We do well to study this Psalm and the abundant examples in Scripture of those who took counsel of their fear to their great regret, as well as those *who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.* (Heb. 11:33,34).

We may naturally (but not spiritually) feel that our meek and mild Jesus, our sympathetic High Priest who understands us in our temptations, will have sympathetic understanding for us when we are flooded with fears and anxieties. Yet, nothing could be farther from the truth. Jesus is the very One who tells us ever, only, always to stop fearing. He does not, in fact, understand our fearing, as that is the one human emotion that there is no record in Scripture of our Savior ever having experienced. Instead of understanding our fears, Jesus wonders at them, grieves over them, and asks us why we have them, telling us in answer to His own question that it is because we fail to exercise the precious and potent divine gift of faith (Mk. 4:40). Let us, therefore, refuse ever to take the sorry counsel of our fears, and instead stand firmly and fearlessly in the strength of the lord's might and the securing blessing of His redeeming mercy.

Yours in Christ's strong love and power,

William Harrell

Hope

Dear Friends,

I hope to write to you about hope. In that sentence I have used the word, *hope*, in two very different senses. In the first instance, I have expressed a wishful desire that may or may not be fulfilled. I hope to write you a letter. I may be successful in my endeavor or not. The second instance, namely, the hope about which I intend to write, is more sure and certain. This is the hope that is used in connection with our Lord, whom Scripture designates the God of hope (Jer. 14:8). It is the hope that is one of the shining jewels in the triad of virtues: faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13). It is about this hope that I intend to write.

The Bible exalts the precious and potent virtue of hope. Yet, we live in a day when immediate gratification is so often experienced by so many that such gratification has become for most people an expected right. Therefore, the value and power of biblical hope can easily escape our notice or suffer from our neglect. It can be, and often is, confused with the concept of wishful desiring.

This devaluation of hope deprives us of one of the most encouraging and empowering virtues of our salvation. Biblical hope is no weak, wishful fancy, but a strong, upholding power. We are told, for example, that we have been saved in hope (Rom. 8:24). What this means is that much, if not most, of our possession of our salvation is not currently within our grasp, but is rather glimpsed by faith in the great and precious promises of the Lord. Yet, this is not to say that hope is some inferior and weak consolation—a mere instruction that tells us we must wait for the full fruition of our redemption.

True hope infuses us with strength and confidence; it fills us with assurance, and awakens within us expectation; and, because the future fulfillment of hope is so absolutely sure and gloriously wonderful, it ignites gratitude within us. Hope is distinct but inseparable from faith and trusting reliance upon the Lord. Hope becomes firm assurance when it is grasped by faith (Heb. 11:1).

Hope can seem like a mere crumb of consolation. The proud expect and demand, like the prodigal, the whole of their inheritance here and now. They do not appreciate that the dimensions of the glorious inheritance of the redeemed far exceed the containing capacity of this world and the transient lives men live in it. The proud despise hope and view it with suspicion and disappointment, for they, while leaning on their own petty understanding and diminished apprehension of the magnitude of the glory that is to be revealed to us, cannot understand why they cannot now have the fullness of salvation.

The fact that we are currently confined to hoping for the major portion and full enjoyment of all that is ours in Christ does not indicate a divine stall tactic employed to string us along for as long as possible before we discover the spare provision that our God has really made for us. In reality, hope makes us realize that as full and wonderful as the gracious divine provision we now have is, it is but a small pledge and token of the gloriously infinite and wonderfully full blessing that is to be ours in the eternal age.

The psalmist, in Psalms 42 and 43, writes about the anguish of his soul, asking why he experiences such despairing grief. The answer he invariably apprehends is his hope in God (Ps. 42:5,11; 43:5). That is more than a sufficient answer for all of this life's painful perplexities and deprivations.

Some of the pains and wounds we receive in this life are wonderfully healed in this life by our Great Physician. Yet, many, if not most of them, will not be soothed and fully healed until in glory our God wipes away all tears from our eyes. Some, and perhaps most, of the perplexities we endure will not be understood by us until in glory we perceive them in the light of our Redeemer's face. Now we see all suffering and disappointment only in part; then we shall know in fullness that the sum of our sufferings

are not worthy to be compared with the glory in which we shall reign with our Christ forever (Rom. 8:18). Now we perceive only the pains and we are mystified and embittered by the deprivations and losses of our lives; then we shall be awed and thrilled to see how productive our God has made those pains to be for us (2 Cor. 4:16-18). Hope is the bridge between our current, momentary, light afflictions, and our possession of that eternal weight of glory issuing marvelously from those afflictions. Let us then learn to hope in the Lord, and we shall never be disappointed, in time or eternity.

Yours in hope,

William Harrell

True and False Hopes

Dear Friends,

I believe that if we were to ask all people on earth whether or not they wanted to be disappointed, we would not get a single soul answering seriously in the affirmative. Who would opt to be disappointed as opposed to having his hopes and expectations satisfied? Yet people overwhelmingly think, speak, and act as though their own disappointment were their well-considered and firmly decided preference. I say this not simply based upon my own limited observation of the disappointments people actually suffer, but rather based upon the invariable truth of God's Word. Scripture informs us that whoever hopes in Christ will not be disappointed (1 Pet. 2:6). Therefore, all who do not hope in Christ—and the majority of people in our day do not hope in the Savior—not only face the great likelihood of current disappointment, but also the certainty of final, irreversible, and eternal crushing of all of their hopes.

It is, however, not only unbelievers who have this grim and grievous prospect. We who do believe in Christ face manifold temptations to trust in and rely upon many things other than Christ. All things other than Christ in which we hope are idols, and as such they are bound to raise our hopes only to disappoint them. Idols must let us down ultimately, not only because they are in themselves lifeless and powerless, but also because they are cursed by the true and living God.

The idols which we may find ourselves denying with our lips may too often be ones that we affirm in our hearts. We may outwardly declare that we love and trust and hope in our heavenly Father, while inwardly we love and rely upon our material possessions with a fervent devotion. We may speak eloquently of our faith, while inwardly we cherish and take counsel, not of the precious promises of the Lord, but rather of our own petty fears. We may declare that Christ is our Lord, while we demonstrate that our friends, our employer, our family, our hobbies, or any number of things actually dictate our lives. We were made to love, trust, and hope in the Lord with all of our being (Mk. 12:30), and to the degree that we fail to do so we will find ourselves creating false gods of practically anything else in the world, and cleaving to them with adamant devotion.

While the idols in which we may trust are almost unlimited, there are two great sources of idol-making, and these sources also provide the demand for the idols they produce. These sources are dangerously close to us and are equipped and ready to strike as at any time. They are our own hearts and minds, the twin mothers of all idols, the bearers of the false gods conceived in them by our sin.

The heart is deceitful and wicked (Jer. 17:9). Out of our hearts come not only the issues of life, but also the issues of disappointment and death. The heart, our emotional center, fills us with passions that overpower us. Since the remnants of our sinfulness taint our emotions, they can fill us with unholy passions, with strong feelings and desires for things other than the Lord. If sin is not mortified wherever it arises, it will entangle us and addict us to idols. That is why we, as believers, must not allow feelings and passions that are not holy and in accord with and based upon the Word of God to rule us (Rom. 6:11-14). We are bound for disappointment if we capitulate to unholy passions.

The other great source of idol-making and idol-desiring is our minds. Despite what the Word of God directs about our trusting in the Lord and not leaning on our own understanding (Prov. 3:5,6), we find it fiercely difficult to avoid dependence upon our own reasoning. This difficulty arises because our own understanding is so familiar to us, and so seemingly right and powerful. The difficulty also arises because our hearts drive our heads. When unholy passions reign in the heart, the head becomes a captive power of the heart to conceive of our having, and holding idolatrous things, and justifying our possession

of them.

Because our minds and hearts are the source of all that we think and feel, it can seem to us a monumental, if not impossible and suicidal undertaking to shut down their idol-making functions. Yet, if we do not mortify our sinful passions, refuse to lean on our own inferior wisdom, and ruthlessly cut out of our lives all possession of and devotion to idols, we shall find ourselves betrayed to severe disappointment. We must bring all of our thoughts and feelings captive to Christ alone. We must allow the Lord by His Word and Spirit to transform our minds and purify and rightly direct our emotions. We must drive out of our hearts and minds love for anything or anyone but the Lord, and then we shall find that He will direct and enable us to love others rightly. We shall find this to be so because the Lord in whom we place all of our hope is no idol that can only and inevitably disappoint us, but the one true lover of our souls who ever, only, and always by far exceeds our highest hopes and greatest expectations.

Yours increasingly hoping in Christ,

William Harrell

Christ our Sufficiency

Dear Friends,

Christ is our sufficiency. This statement is true on the highest and most vital level of our lives. Only Christ has regarded us in all of our unworthiness and unloveliness and has loved us to the uttermost, giving His life as a ransom for us. Only Christ can cleanse us of the guilt, heal us of the wounds, and deliver us from the power of our sins. Only Christ was qualified to serve as our substitutionary atonement, taking onto Himself the penalty of our sins and providing for us His perfect righteousness. We have only one Advocate who pleads prevailingly for us in heaven before the throne of God's perfect justice, and that is Christ. Only Christ pacified the holy wrath of God that burned against us on account of our sins. Only Christ justifies, and only He has caused to be sent into the world the other Comforter, namely, the Holy Spirit who sanctifies us. Only Christ can give peace in storms and joy that is so deep and lasting and glorious that it cannot be adequately expressed in this world of shadows, limitations, and tears. Only Christ has the keys of death and hell, and only His voice will one day raise us from the dead.

With all that Christ is to us, it is no wonder that He is designated by God's Word as the one thing necessary. Nor should we marvel that Christ Himself tells us that without Him we can do nothing. The things mentioned above that Christ is to us and has done for us are each one of greatest importance, and all together they form such a complex of grace and glory that we shall never be able fully to comprehend the magnitude and wonder of all that Christ is to us. It is this immeasurable and sublime character that can make our contemplation of Christ and His saving work to be so exceedingly challenging that we feel we might exhaust ourselves were we to try and comprehend it all. Hence, we find ourselves returning to the dull but comprehensible distractions of mundane things.

Yet Christ is our abounding sufficiency not only in things heavenly and that pertain to eternal glory, He is also our great sufficiency in matters temporal and practical. The Bible teaches us that Christ, our wisdom, is better than silver and gold. By this we should understand that we are being told not only that Christ compensates us lastingly and gloriously for all the pangs and pains we suffer in this life, not only that the entrance He gives us to heaven and the deliverance from divine condemnation shall in the end prove more valuable than all this world could offer, but also that Christ is better than silver and gold here and now. His wisdom guides us in ways where a fortune could not begin to do. A fool can and invariably will misspend a fortune, but with the mind of Christ we are equipped with enabling power to perceive things seen and unseen that bless us and cause us to bless and praise our God whether He gives to us or takes away from us the things of this world.

Christ is the one Friend who sticks closer than a brother to us here and now in all of our trials and triumphs. He never leaves or forsakes us, whereas the loving devotion of all others in our lives has its limits. Christ is the Great Physician who alone can perfectly heal all of our wounds—whether they be physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. There is no work too difficult for Him, no field of knowledge advanced beyond His capacity to master; no danger that can cause Him to faint. He knows all things and upholds and governs all things by the Word of His power and sovereign authority.

Since Christ is our sufficiency in things heavenly and earthly, in eternity and time, it is the height of folly for us to regard anything in this world or the next to be more important and vital to us than He is. There is no course we can be called to run, no temptation or trial we can suffer, no pain we can bear, no emotion we can feel—in sum, nothing in all of human experience that we can encounter where He has not preceded us in the experience of it and masterful triumph through it. Nor is He stingy with His own infinitely rich and enriching human experience and understanding. If we would but call upon Him, seek Him, trust, and rely upon Him more than we now do, our lives would possess a greater mastery over all things and would be filled with gratitude to God for and in all things. If we seek our sufficiency in

anything but Christ, we shall find that we succeed only in spending ourselves for that which provides only frustration, failure, and misery.

Yours in Christ,
William Harrell

Forgiveness

Dear Friends,

David writes in the opening verse of Psalm 32: How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Why is forgiveness such a great blessing? It is because forgiveness of sin is a treasure of many facets that works a manifold transformation in both the one forgiving as well as the one being forgiven.

Forgiveness relieves the sinner of a crushing debt, while it satisfied the One to whom the debt is owed. In the case of our sinning against God, the infinite and eternal debt we owe due to our having offended an infinite and eternal Person is entirely and irrevocably satisfied. The sinner is a debtor no longer to offended divine justice, but rather to saving divine mercy alone. The justice of God is satisfied when, for the sake of Christ's substitutionary atonement, God grants forgiveness to the sinner.

Forgiveness grants freedom from the guilt of sin. This means first and foremost that when God forgives a sinner, the sinner's status is transformed from that of his being guilty in the eyes of the Lord to that of his being justified in God's sight. The Lord, rather than being unable to bear the sight of the guilty sinner, welcomes the justified saint. Such forgiveness deals decisively with objective guilt, but the subjective guilt feelings of the sinner also diminish progressively and give way to holy gratitude and confidence.

Forgiveness restores fellowship between God and man that had been ruptured by man's sin. The guilt and debt of the sinner made him dread the God of holiness, and therefore the sinner sought to flee from, hide from, and suppress the knowledge of the Lord. Forgiveness restores a spirit of loving intimacy where God accepts the forgiven in His beloved Son and the forgiven delights in God as a loving Father.

Forgiveness cleanses the corruption of the sinner. By the atoning sacrifice of Christ, a fountain for such cleansing is provided; by the actual forgiveness of God, the cleansing is applied to the sinner.

Forgiveness relieves the sinner of his misery. Although the sinner might try to suppress the knowledge of God and of his sin in God's sight, he cannot completely succeed in this vain endeavor. Thus he retains a guilty conscience, a sense of his enormous moral debt, and an awareness of how sin has corrupted and continues to corrupt his life. The forgiveness of God digs up the root causes of such misery, and in due course the fruits of misery wither.

In similar fashion, forgiveness heals the wounds our sins have caused in us and in others. Such healing takes time, but it is healing time. So long as sin is a living and active principle in our lives, it is as though we are continually being torn by a lion and occasioning that others with whom we sinfully deal should be torn by the lion as well. Forgiveness kills the lion and dresses the wounds. Though the wounds may be for a time still sore, they are cleansed and bound up and healing more with each passing day.

Forgiveness transforms all of the bitter consequences of our sin from being accumulations and aggravations to our guilt, debt, corruption, and misery, to being facets of all things that God causes to work for the good of those who love Him because He has forgiven them their sins.

Much more blessing is involved in our forgiveness than that of which I have briefly written above. However, from what I have written, we may all agree that forgiveness is indeed a precious and powerful treasure.

Our Lord teaches us and tells us to pray that we forgive others their sins against us as He has forgiven our sins against Him. This means that included in the atoning death of Christ is balm enough to heal not only the wounds we have made in our relationship with God through our sins, but also to heal the damage we have inflicted upon our relationships with others due to our sins against them and their sins against us.

If we are to forgive others as God forgives us, we are ever to look to Christ as the sole agent by which

forgiveness may be asked and given. We are not to consider the magnitude of the sin or the worthiness or worthlessness of the sinner. All genuine forgiveness is for Christ's sake.

If we are to forgive as our God forgives, we are to be quick and ready to forgive. If we confess our sins, our God is faithful to forgive them (1 Jn. 1:9). He does not delay or refuse to issue forgiveness when it is asked. If He is quick to forgive the infinite and eternal magnitude of our sins against Him, how can we be slow to forgive the petty sins others have committed against us?

If we are to forgive as our Lord forgives, we are to forgive completely. The divine forgiveness cancels all debt, all guilt, washes away all corruption, and heals all wounds. The completeness of this is indicated in Scripture by images of distance (as far as the east is from the west, so far has God removed our sins from us) and of forgetfulness (God remembers our sins no more). If we continue to think about our forgiven sins or the sins of others we have forgiven, we are acting contrary to the character of forgiveness.

If we forgive as God forgives, we must determine to forgive more, if and when it becomes necessary. The One who tells us to forgive seven times 70, tells us that forgiveness can and should have limitless application. What a blessing!

Yours as a forgiven sinner,
William Harrell

The Depths of Sin and Salvation

Dear Friends,

At a recent prayer meeting I gave a brief meditation on Psalm 58. A number of those at the meeting told me how moved they were by the wonder of God's grace in His redeeming such loathsome creatures as are described in that psalm. None of us would know how bad we were in our sin and how wondrous our Lord's deliverance from our sin is apart from the Lord Himself telling us.

The psalm begins with two questions, the first posed to men who think they are gods, the second posed to those same men as they truly are, namely, not gods but sons of men. The psalmist asks if such arrogant men speak and judge righteously, and he answers with a categorical denial.

The psalm then goes on to describe in lurid detail how the sinner is neither a god nor even a man, but has fallen by his sin into being worse than a beast. The natural man is declared to be born bad, as he has inherited original sin that has separated him from God as well as from his fellow man (v.3). He is then likened to a venomous serpent (vv.4,5).

In vv. 6-9 the description of the natural man continues with shocking and at sometimes repulsive imagery. Added to this further exposition of how greatly the sinner has fallen from his original state of being an upright man made in the image of God, we find that the Lord is called upon by the psalmist to judge sinners. These imprecatory prayers do not ask God to be cruel to sinful men, but rather to deal righteously with them, as their sin deserves. God is asked to shatter teeth, and thus render harmless, men who had become by their sin like threatening snakes and imposing predators (v.6). The Lord is asked to make sinners useless in their aims and effects (v.7). That the sinner should be reduced to self-destruction and fruitlessness is the petition in v.8. Finally, that sinners should be swiftly swept away before their wicked appetites can be fulfilled is asked in v.9. Some of the images in these verses are repulsive: there is the snail melting away and the woman's miscarriage (v.8). This is the picture of the character, career, and divine condemnation of the sinner that the Holy Spirit has given us in Scripture.

Of this divinely inspired portrayal of the natural man, I said at the prayer meeting the following:

This is the picture of the man, the woman, the child without God. It is not a picture of the worst man without God; it is a picture of all sinners. We are, without the regenerating work of God, as Jonathan Edwards declared us to be in his sermon about sinners in the hands of an angry God; we are as loathsome spiders, suspended by the most slender thread over a raging fire, being held up only by the mercy of God's patience.

But this is not where the psalm ends. In v.10 mention is made of the righteous. How do we have this other class of beings called the righteous? If we are all born sinners, how do any of us become righteous? It is by the redeeming mercy of God in Christ. It is by the regenerating work of God's Holy Spirit. It is all by God's grace and power, and it is wonderful for us to contemplate the change that God has wrought in us, if we are in Christ. It is also an edifying wonder for us to contemplate the despicable, dangerous, and disgusting creatures we were in our sin before the Lord saved us. Our God saved us from ourselves—our terrible selves.

Our God saved us from more than ourselves. We are told in v.10 that the righteous rejoice when God judges sinners, washing their feet in the blood of the wicked. Surely this speaks of our deliverance from the threatenings and destructiveness of evil men. Our God secures us from the wicked and makes us to

stride over them when they are laid prostrate by our God and we are exalted and empowered to be more than conquerors.

We are finally told that there is a reward for the righteous (v.11). That we should be delivered from the corruption, degradation, and misery of our sin; that we should be delivered from the guilt and divine condemnation of our sin; that we should be delivered from the dominion of our sins and the imposing domination of other arrogant and threatening sinners; that we should be delivered from these things gives us abundant cause to rejoice and to sing grateful praises to the God of our deliverance for all eternity. But we are not only delivered, we are rewarded. We are adopted as the beloved children of the God of heaven and earth. We have an inheritance that is infinite and eternal and glorious. We have union with Christ and communion with our brethren in the Lord.

Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges, not like the deluded gods sinners make of themselves. Thanks be to our God that all righteous judgment is in His hands, and not in the hands of those who only think that they are gods.

Yours rejoicing in imputed righteousness,

William Harrell

Words God Has Joined Together

Dear Friends,

It is important for us to note and to understand that in Scripture the adjectives used are as important as the nouns they modify. These parts of speech God has joined together in His Word, and we are wrong and open ourselves to great temptation and misery if we try to tear them asunder.

Consider, for example, the noun *Spirit*. There are times when we find it standing alone in Scripture, but when that is the case we are to understand that it carries an implicit modifier. It is not any spirit or any spiritual manifestation that Scripture intends by the use of the word, *Spirit*. Rather, it is the Holy Spirit who is being designated in such references. We are, in fact, warned against believing every spirit, and we are told to test the spirits to distinguish the counterfeits from the genuine Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 4:1,2).

It is the adjective, *holy*, that alerts us to the true character of the Spirit of the Lord and of the gifts He imparts to the Lord's people. Accordingly, those filled with the Spirit of the Lord have, love, and cultivate holiness in their lives. They are not ones who babble supposed tongues or claim to cast out demons or purport to prophesy. Such ones, Christ Himself declares, will not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 7:21-23). Those full of the Holy Spirit will bear increasingly the fruit of holiness outlined in Gal. 5:22-25. Those full of counterfeit spirits will speak of works of miraculous power while thinking nothing of and manifesting little if any of the fruits of holy character.

Another example of the need for us to give due regard to the adjectives of Scripture is found with a consideration of the noun, *grace*. We have all heard grace defined as unmerited favor. In fact, with respect to the biblical use of that term, such a definition is woefully inadequate and therefore false and misleading. A man can without qualification give money to a person, and that would be a manifestation of unmerited favor. However, we would hardly be correct to think that a man giving money to a terrorist is exercising the kind of grace that God shows to His people.

In Scripture, the word, *grace*, rarely stands alone. It is always modified, either explicitly or implicitly, to convey the notion of its source and end both being in the God of holiness. We are told that the Lord gives grace (Ps. 84:11); that we have received and should continue in the grace of God (Acts 13:43); that we are commended to the grace of the Lord (Acts 15:40); that grace comes to us from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:7); and the benediction that is ours is that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with us all (2 Cor. 13:14). Not one of these expressions conveys the bare notion of unmerited favor, but they all express the favor of the holy God sanctifying His people for His glory.

Those who wrest God from His grace find themselves easily and inexorably led into false views of divine grace, and they live not in the world of the Lord's grace but rather in the seedy realm of sinful license. This is so because grace separated from our holy God as well as from the purpose for which He gives grace to us—namely for our sanctification—is the polar opposite of the Lord's grace. By the grace of the Lord, we are delivered from our sins, not indulged in them. Counterfeit grace is just such an indulgence in sin, leading those who fall for this counterfeit into the erroneous belief that it does not matter to God and it should not matter to us whether we sin.

Incidentally, there is also a connection between grace and freedom in Scripture, but it is not an unqualified grace launching us into an unqualified freedom. As the grace spoken of in Scripture is the grace of our holy God introducing us into and sustaining us in holy living for His glory, so the freedom

that such grace gives to us is the freedom of the glory of the children of God (Rom. 8:21). This means that when the Son of God sets men free (Jn. 8:36), they are free not to pursue their own sinful passions without fear of painful consequences, but they are rather free indeed, meaning truly free from the dominion, guilt, corruption, and misery of sin, and free for a consecrated walk with the Lord of glory. Accordingly, Scripture warns us not to turn our freedom into opportunities for the flesh (Gal. 5:13), and not to use our freedom as a covering for evil (1 Pet. 2:16).

Those who have tasted the genuine grace of the Lord know that it is good and pleasant to have received such loving favor from the God of holiness to enable us to grow in that holiness without which no one will see the Lord. Such grace does not lead us to take sin casually, but rather prompts us to mortify even the smallest remnants of our sin. We do this not to earn God's favor, but precisely because we have received His holy favor and rejoice in the fact that we have been, by God's grace, crucified with Christ and have consequently died to sin so that we no longer live in it (Rom. 6:1,2).

Yours in the grace of Christ,

William Harrell

Consolations for the Dying

Dear Friends,

The Bible is essentially a practical book. Its principles and teachings are never merely academic, philosophical, or speculative, but are always anchored in and aimed at the living God and the daily living of His people. That is one reason why there is so little in the Bible about heaven. The focus of the Word of God is on how a person lives here and now—whether by faith to the glory of God’s grace, or in sin to the condemnation of the sinner and the manifestation of the glory of God’s justice. What we are given in Scripture regarding heaven and our eternal life in glory is sufficient to give us encouraging hope and consolation, but not so full and detailed as to intoxicate us with the contemplation of things that are for now too wonderful for us to bear. Even so, as a person realizes that he is drawing near to his own death, the biblical teachings about heaven seem to multiply, and what may have seemed but a few crumbs during one’s life form a veritable feast of consolation for one approaching his exodus from this world.

What consolations are in the Word of God for those who are dying? There are great and precious promises of eternal life. These promises are found in words explicitly stated, such as when Jesus tells those who believe in Him that they have eternal life, and will not come into judgment, but have passed out of death into life (Jn. 5:24). In other places the promises of eternal life are more implicit, as when, for example, we are told that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and that as the Lord is not the God of the dead, therefore these patriarchs must be alive after their deaths (Mt. 22:31,32).

In addition to explicit and implicit consolations, we have the testimony of those who by faith have been enabled rightly to look beyond the momentary and light course of afflictions in this life to perceive the incomparable and eternal weight of glory that is to be ours (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:16-18). For example, the patriarchs were content to live as sojourners in the very land God had promised to them and to die in faith, not having received the provision of the divine promises, because they rightly reckoned their inheritance in glory was too great and glorious to be contained in this world (Heb. 11:13-16). There is also the example of Job, who declared that he would continue to live and trust his God even if his God should slay him (Job 13:15). The first Christian martyr, Stephen, saw at his death the heavens opened and Christ standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:55,56). Stephen was not merely a spectator of Christ’s ascension to heaven, but he confidentially commended his spirit to the Son of God, thus revealing to us the hope that we have at our dying to be with Jesus in Paradise (Acts 7:59).

Our God has not only promised His people heaven and eternal life with Him in glory, He has also provided us with abundant, though not exhaustive, demonstration of that sure hope of our life in eternal and incomparable glory. Our Lord Jesus has shown us His conquest of death by His manifold resurrection appearances. He also revealed to us something of the glorious splendor of His ascension when He appeared to John on Patmos. The images John employs to describe to us his vision of the ascended Christ portray to us something of the effulgent majesty and might of our ascended Lord. Such revelation also informs and guides our understanding of what we shall be like in our glorified state. All weaknesses, defects, and inadequacies will be removed from us and replaced by strengths and perfections and vast capacities that Paul sketches for us in his resurrection chapter of First Corinthians (1 Cor. 15). The beauties of our glorified state as individuals and as a vast company of redeemed souls made perfect in glory are most fully set out for us in Revelation 21, 22. There we are told that all of our tears will be wiped away, that there shall no longer be any curse or night. How can we who have lived all of our lives under God’s curse conceive of how wonderful it will be for us to be free of these painful things? But

beyond these negations being removed, we shall have the positive pleasure and immense privilege of seeing our Redeemer's face and reigning with Him forever.

These are sure and substantial truths and strong comforts for our souls. If we are facing death, they remove the sting; they reduce the threat from a monstrous body to a mere shadow; they fortify us with the delightful knowledge that for the Christian to die is gain. Even now before we face death these truths enlarge our lives, giving us greater and truer perspective on our lives as we apprehend that we have been made and redeemed by our God to be forever with Him in holy and loving communion in perfection and glory. We have been born again to an infinite and eternal inheritance. All of our striving, service, and suffering here in this little life and world serve to prepare us to possess and enlarge us to contain that inconceivable inheritance. When we rightly grasp these truths it is no wonder that we say with the Holy Spirit of God, *Come quickly, Lord Jesus.*

Yours in the sure hope of glory,

William Harrell

The Thoughts of God

Dear Friends,

There are some things that we can do that our God cannot do. We can lie, He can speak nothing but truth; we can sin, He can only do righteousness; we can die, He has lived and will live forever. Our capacity to do such things does not make us greater but infinitely less than our God.

The examples of such things as those listed above are examples of sinful endeavor that we too naturally do and that God cannot do. There are, however, other examples where we can perform in ways that our God cannot perform that are not essentially sinful but rather have to do with the difference between our being finite creatures and our Lord being the infinite and eternal God. For example, we fail to accomplish many sincerely intended good endeavors. Our God, due to His almighty power, cannot fail to do what He intends to do.

One of the greatest differences between ourselves and our God is found in the area of thought. The things we do may be limited by the finite extent of our power, but it would seem that with our thoughts there can be no limit. It is, for example, a task so far impossible for man to control the weather or to travel instantaneously from one place in creation to another. Yet, we can easily think about our doing such things. Such speculative or imaginative thinking, we may suppose, narrows the capacity gap between the Lord and ourselves. However, it is precisely in the realm of thought that we are most unlike our God.

The Bible tells us something critical for us to understand about the thoughts of our God when it links His thinking to His doing. In Psalm 40:5 we read: *Many, O Lord my God, are the wonders which Thou hast done, and Thy thoughts toward us: there is none to compare with Thee; if I would declare and speak of them, they would be too numerous to count.* Notice how David links the wondrous doings of the Lord with His incomparable thoughts. We may note the same link in Psalm 92:5: *How great are Thy works, O Lord! Thy thoughts are very deep.* The Lord Himself tells us that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Is. 55:9). We are to understand this not only in the sense that the Lord's thoughts are more pure and exalted than our low, limited, and often vile mental activity. The thoughts of our God are superior to ours also because of how they are linked to His actions. Our thoughts are disconnected from or only imperfectly connected to our actions. The thoughts of God all issue in perfect and holy action.

We waste most of our thoughts in speculating flights of fancy, whereas our God is the supreme realist. We are prodigious in the production of thoughts that at best issue in partial and imperfect actions, and at worst issue from and in vanity. Not one of the thoughts of the Lord is like that. Our God is simply incapable of ruminating over a number of mental conceptions and forming a plan of action from the selection of the best thought or the merging together of various aspects from several thoughts. The notions of potentiality, contingency, and possibility belong to the realm of the creature and of the derived, not of the Creator from whom all things originate. God created potentiality and contingency for the exercise not of His own thought process but for that of His creatures.

Most of our thoughts are discarded as being undesirable or impracticable. The reason that we can seem to out-think our God is that we think badly and poorly. Every one of the thoughts of our God results in perfectly executed action precisely because He never has a wrong or poor or undesirable thought, nor does He lack the will and power to bring His infinitely and infallibly wise and holy thoughts into the fruition of reality.

Accordingly, faith enables us rightly to reckon that the plans and promises of our God are as good as His

performance, for with our God His Word declared is as good as His work accomplished. Faith does not lead us into the realm of philosophical speculation over the being and attributes of our God so much as it leads us into the apprehension and growing understanding of the perfect thoughts of our sovereign God that ever, only, and always result in the perfect realization of those thoughts.

Therefore, when we rightly regard the connection between the predestinating plans and purposes of our God and their realization in creation, we should not think there were several different ways in which God could have elected and redeemed His people but that He merely decided to do it through the incarnation, perfect life, atoning death, and justifying resurrection of His Son. Instead, we should know that the works of our God flow from His perfect thoughts, and do not result from a consideration of aspects from many thoughts of varying quality. The reason which some are elected by God to be redeemed by Christ is that such has been from all eternity the singular thought of God with respect to man, the crown of His creation. This truth should give us great comfort and draw from us grateful and continual praise. Our God not only thinks far above our thoughts, but He does above what we ask or think as He inexorably transforms His thoughts into perfect and praiseworthy deeds. Our God is the supreme realist, and that is why not one of His words or promises can or will pass away.

Yours in growing wonder of our God,

William Harrell

When Less is More

Dear Friends,

Sometimes more is less and less is more. Whether more is less depends upon the character of what is more; whether less is more depends upon the character of what is less. Our first parents had all that they truly needed or could rightly desire. Adam and Eve had holy, loving communion with the God who had created them and they had affinity with and dominion over creation. Yet, Satan offered them more when he tempted them to partake of the forbidden fruit. They learned, and we know by bitter experience, that the more they were promised by the devil resulted in an incalculable lessening of their lives.

With the gospel, we appear to be offered less than we desire. We are told to trust in a crucified man for our salvation; we are told to carry our own crosses daily; we are told that when we are weary and heavy laden we should come to Christ and take upon ourselves His yoke and burden, finding in such apparent lessening of the rest we seek an increasing of better rest, spiritual rest.

Perhaps the clearest example of the less our Lord offers through which He gives more is that of the Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:22-28; Mk. 7:25-30). She came to Jesus asking for His merciful help for her demon-possessed daughter. He appeared to give her less and less, first ignoring her, then seeming to exclude her from the covenant people of God, and finally calling her a dog. Yet, she grasped the last seeming insult of our Lord to declare that she, as a dog, would be content to feed upon the crumbs that fell from her Master's table. This lesser thing that our Lord offered and that this woman of great faith accepted not only resulted in her daughter's healing—the thing she had sought—but also in her being commended by Jesus. She also left Him having a purer, stronger, greater faith than that which she had when she approached Him.

It is not unusual for us to be offered less by our Lord than what we ask or think we need. The tenor of the Ten Commandments reveals to us the reductions that God offers to make us great. The natural man desires to have many gods of his own choosing. He wants to worship himself, his family, his possessions, his favorite sports team, and the list goes on. The Lord commands that we love and worship Him alone. We want to gossip about others and to be sinfully angry with them, and God tells us we are not to kill people even with our words. We want to covet, God forbids it. In the summary of the Ten Commandments Jesus tells us to love only God with all of our being, while we want to spread our love, thinking that it will grow. The Lord seems intent on taking so much from us, reducing our lives to a singular focus upon Himself. However, all who have accepted this lessening have found themselves not only filled with satisfaction and enabling power, but they also discover that their peace increases, their joy deepens, and their capacities to contain greater blessings and to serve triumphantly expand.

We do well to recognize and submit to this paradox that when we are weakened, deprived, lessened by our Lord, then we are strong with a vital, prevailing, and enduring strength. We do well to realize that this paradoxical promotion of our highest good also applies to those seasons when even the spiritual provision of the Lord seems to lessen. Jacob's wrestling with the Lord who appeared to oppose him, Job's excruciating losses and mounting afflictions, Paul's thorn in the flesh and manifold sufferings, all teach us not to despise the days of small spiritual consolations. We, too, must learn to look for and feed upon the crumbs of the Lord's provision; for if crumbs are all that He provides for a time, we must reckon that His diminished provision is still more than gracious and will prove to be abundantly sufficient for us.

This matter ultimately has to do with who God is and who we are. Our God is simple while we are complex. We may distinguish His attributes but we cannot separate them. He is entirely and perfectly good, wise, loving, just, and holy. He is perfect, contains all perfection, and is the source of perfection. Therefore, anything that could be added to Him would only be imperfection. We are sinners and thus we are fractured, imperfect beings. We are a complex of the fallen, fractured natural goodness that our God gave to our first parents and the rebellious, guilty, corrupting, and misery-causing sin that Adam and Eve took to themselves and passed on to us. The only true lessening our God effects in our lives is the lessening of sin and its painful consequences. Sin is the awful addition to our lives that would, apart from God's redeeming grace, devour us completely. Let us learn, then, never to resist, but always to rejoice in the lessening work of our saving God. We are never destined more surely for greater exaltation than when we are lessened by the reduction of our sin and made ever more holy under His wise, holy, loving, and almighty hand.

Yours in the death and resurrection of Christ,

William Harrell