

Control and Contentment

Dear Friends,

The issue of control is a vital one for us rightly to consider. We live in a day when controlling personalities seem on the rise. People increasingly equate their security and well-being with their being able to control all elements of and persons in their environment. The term, control freak, has come into our verbal coinage precisely because there are increasing numbers of people trying to impose their will on all they survey or even conceive of surveying. It is helpful for us to compare and contrast the quest of the controlling person with that of the contented person filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

The controlling person is outwardly oriented. He seeks to change his circumstances. He focuses not on authority, or what is right as defined by God, who is the highest authority. The controlling person, instead, focuses more on sheer power to impose not God's will but his own. There is for the controlling person an assumption of self-righteousness. The controller considers that he is always right and that the need is not that he change, but rather that all things around him change.

The results of the imperiously controlling person's actions are not peace and order, but rather the spawning of hurt and resentment, defensiveness, avoidance, and defiance in others. The controlling person cannot usually avoid perceiving these responses from others, so another result of his controlling actions is bitter frustration in himself and his maintaining a determined contempt for others. If the controller ever does succeed in imposing peace and order it is the peace of the grave, where all human life and spontaneity are extinguished.

The person gratefully and contentedly filled with the fruit of God's Holy Spirit is concerned about control, but in a very different way from those having controlling personalities. The orientation of controlling endeavor for the spiritual man is toward himself, not toward others. He is concerned with self-control (Eph. 5:23) primarily, and so far as others are concerned, he is concerned with serving them in righteousness and love rather than with seeking imperiously to rule over them. The spiritual man focuses his prayers and efforts on the changing of his character, rather than the changing of his circumstances. His desire is to be edified, to mortify sin in himself rather than to castigate sin in others. He wants his mind transformed more than he desires to have his outward condition changed.

Whereas the controlling person concerns himself with the acquisition and use of power to impose his will on others, the self-controlled person concerns himself with his own knowing and submitting to the righteous authority of God. The prevailing of the divine will over his own will is his chief desire, delight, and determination. The spiritual man is not very concerned with his status in the world. He is not driven by a sense of his inferiority and an insecure drive to have all men acknowledge and applaud him. He is instead gratefully and contentedly secure in his status of being justified in Christ.

The results of one's being empowered by the Holy Spirit to aim for and attain self-control are manifold. He who seeks to remove the log from his own eye does not remain indifferent or ineffectually attentive to the speck in others' eyes. It is, in fact, only the ones who live spiritually self-controlled lives who can faithfully and with loving grace, patience, and effectiveness deal with the specks in the eyes of others. The self-controlled man is not driven by sinful, deceptive, and manipulative passions, but rather has found rest and healing in Christ. Such self-controlled ones are like the demoniac who, after he was cleansed of his legion of wickedly powerful demons, sat clothed and in his right mind, and was, accordingly, ready and able to be used in Christ's service.

Self-control is related to the contentment, or self-sufficiency, that Paul writes of in Philippians 4. Those who by God's grace and power in Christ do not let sin reign in their lives and who submit themselves entirely to the revealed will and glory of the Lord, are well-equipped to face the challenges of their circumstances because they know and rely upon the truth that both they and their circumstances are in the good and sovereignly controlling hands of God, who makes all things work for the good of those who love Him.

Those who reign over themselves through Christ's Spirit and power are the only truly contented ones, the only effectively competent ones, and the only ones who live their lives as super-conquerors. Let us, then, learn to bring all things captive to our Lord by first bringing ourselves captive to the righteous and loving control of the Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us.

Your fellow student in the mastery of self-control,

William Harrell

Keeping a Pure Heart

Dear Friends,

The pure in heart are blessed by their seeing God (Mt. 5:8), and those who see God see all things rightly in His perfect light (Ps. 36:9). It is therefore no wonder that the Word of God emphasizes the vital necessity of men having pure hearts, while those who believe the divine testimony of Scripture find that they have a growing desire to have such hearts. The question then becomes one of how the believer can attain and keep a pure heart.

The best answer to that vital question is that we should consider ourselves to be dead. This does not mean that we cultivate the ascetic passivity of the eastern mystic or the apathy of the stoic. It means that we regard ourselves truly to have been crucified with Christ and raised up with Him in new life (Rom. 6:3-11).

Our Redeemer has given us the supreme example of self-mortification when he prayed in Gethsemane, Not My will but Thy will be done (Mt. 26:39). Our Lord also taught us to pray in the same way when He told us to pray Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:10).

What this means is that we are to mortify our desires, plans, and agendas. If we regard ourselves as dead, it is clear that the dead have no agendas. Yet we are not merely dead, we are united to Christ in His death. Therefore, as Christ submitted His will to the will of His heavenly Father, so we submit our wills to the will of that same heavenly Father. Such submission of our wills to the divine will entails our renouncing our own impure and weak passions for the holy and glorious desires of our God; we renounce our finite and fallible understanding for the infallible wisdom of our Lord; we cease to rely on our weakness and cast ourselves, instead, upon His almighty power; and we forsake the quest after imperfect and changeable human love for the pleasure of our luxuriating in the immeasurable and unchangeable love of our God.

When we fail to renounce our wills and submit, instead, to the Lord's will, we invariably seek such things as personal gain, promotion, and comforts. We would never seek loss, humiliation, and suffering. Yet rarely would our Lord have us to possess the former things, while He usually would have us to accept and even glory in the latter things (2 Cor. 12:9,10). It is no wonder, then, when we pursue our own will without highest regard for the Lord's will for us, that we find ourselves frustratingly groping in darkness rather than walking and serving fruitfully and satisfyingly in the light of the Lord. On the other hand, when with pure hearts we are sincerely desirous to know and truly willing to do the Lord's will, we easily see and know the will and way of our God (Jn. 7:17).

We are naturally inclined, however, not to renounce our wills but to promote them. Too frequently we approach a decision with the presupposition that we know what is right and best for all concerned. Yet a little self-examination would reveal to us a remarkable correlation between what we determine to be right and what we desire to be right. With categorical contradiction the Scripture speaks against our smug and self-centered

certitude. We are told by wise Solomon not to lean upon the trembling reed of our own understanding, but rather to trust in the Lord with all of our hearts (Prov. 3:5,6).

It is one thing for us to know and even to confess that such absolute and continual trust in the Lord is the right thing for us to exercise; yet it is quite another thing for us actually to acknowledge Him in all of our ways. Jesus has told us that without Him we can do nothing (Jn. 15:5). His statement is so clear and simple that a child could understand it. Yet few of us believe our Lord's statement in the absolute and categorical sense of the words He has used. Without thinking, we launch ourselves into all sorts of endeavors, failing to acknowledge the Lord and assuming that we can do all sorts of things without Him. This is not self-mortification, but is, instead, self-exaltation.

What we are called to do in every detail and decision of our lives is to determine from the light of God's Word what the right thing is for us to think, feel, say, and do in every relationship and in every situation, great and small. Our ability to discern the right way—the way of the Lord—is diminished in direct proportion to the degree that we have and cherish a personal agenda. The one who truly prays, Not my will but Thy will be done, and who seeks to think and act in conformity with and not contrary to that prayer, will find that he has a pure heart and consequent ability, without the obscuring clouds of personal passion, to see God and in His light to see all things, not as we or anyone else deludedly or deceptively want them to appear, but as they truly are. We do well, therefore, with increasing fervency to pray for, to seek after, and to knock for pure hearts that alone can perceive and receive all that our God would show us and convey to us.

Yours striving for greater purity,

William Harrell

Forgiveness

Dear Friends,

The Bible tells us that we do not know how to pray properly (Rom. 8:25). The disciples of Jesus, sensing this, asked our Lord to teach them how to pray (Lk. 11:1). Jesus responded to their request by giving to them and to us a model prayer which we call The Lord's Prayer. This model prayer should be our clearest guide for the form and character of our own prayers. It teaches us rightly to pray for things of paramount importance and vital necessity. One of the things we are taught to pray for, as a petition to the throne of God's grace, is forgiveness. Jesus tells us to ask God to: Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. We do well, therefore, not only to ask forgiveness of our God, but also to understand that for which we are asking. It is too easy for us to have vague and weak notions of forgiveness, and such notions undermine our apprehension of the precious potency of that forgiveness that we receive from God as well as the forgiveness that we give to those who have sinned against us.

A simple definition of the verb, to forgive, is to give away a right. The right arises from an injurious offense that one person receives from another. The injury gives the offended party the right, in accordance with the dictates of justice, to collect payment for damages suffered. The one who forgives relinquishes his right to receive such payment that is due to him from the party that offended him.

It takes but a moment's reflection upon this definition for us to sense how costly forgiveness is to the one who gives it. The forgiving party is the offended and injured party, and by his rendering forgiveness he determines to require no payment from the offending party. Such payment would justly be the offended person's due and would also serve to repair the offensive damage he has suffered. Therefore, we should note how the forgiving person suffers twice: first when he endures the offense; then when he relinquishes his right for that restorative compensation that justly is due to him from the offending party. It is precisely our apprehension of this double loss that the one who forgives endures that makes us at least to some degree reluctant to forgive others.

However, our Lord does not begin by directing us to forgive others. Rather, Jesus encourages us to ask God for forgiveness before He mentions anything about our forgiving others. Here we find ourselves brought to the lesson of the parable of the unmerciful servant, where that servant was forgiven his enormous debt by his master, but then went out himself mercilessly to demand full payment of the pittance owed to him by one of his own debtors (Mt. 18:21-35).

The magnificent grace of God shines through the fact that the Son of God teaches us to petition His heavenly Father and ours for His forgiveness of our sins against Him. The fact that Jesus tells us to address this offended God as our Father alerts us to the loving and compassionate readiness of our offended God to relinquish His right to punish us for our original sin as well as our many and heinous actual sins. We are taught further to ask such forgiveness because we have not the slightest hope of accomplishing our own satisfaction of the infinite debt we owe to God's justice on account of our sinning against His infinite and eternal Person and His holy and righteous Law. Nor are we urged to ask for a partial forgiveness, but rather a full freedom from all of the guilt, penalty, and punishment of our sins. Such forgiveness does not simply release us from these negative things, it also entails our being accepted by God in His beloved Son, and

our possessing peace and joy in ever increasing measure as the justified and adopted children of God.

While all of these blessings of divine forgiveness issue from the merciful compassion of our God, that compassion is infinitely more than a benevolent and magnanimous attitude on the part of God. The forgiving compassion of God has not only inclined Him to forgo His justly due payment of our punishment for our sins against Him, it has also entailed God assuming that payment Himself through the giving of His Son to bear our sins. God has given His only begotten and beloved Son to endure for us the full measure of our due punishment to the satisfaction of divine justice, while the perfect righteousness of Christ our Redeemer is accounted as being ours. In place of our infinite debt, we have infinite merit for the asking.

In comparison with the infinitely lavish nature of this divine forgiveness, what is our forgiving others of their sins against us? We are not holy like God, but are sinners who justly deserve eternal divine punishment, not to mention momentary, light affliction from men. Nor have we suffered the depth and degree of offense in the sins that others have committed against us as our God has in our sins against Him. So the forgiveness we are to offer others is but a faint reflection of that forgiveness lavished upon us by our great, glorious, and gracious God.

Yet, we are not to forgive only upon our consideration of how infinitely greater the Lord's forgiveness is to ours. As God forgives us on the basis of Christ's perfect satisfaction for our offense, so when we forgive others, we are also offering that forgiveness on the basis of the infinitely rich and objectively potent satisfaction that Christ has rendered even for the sins of others against us (Eph. 4: 32). Why should we feel and act as though we are moral and merciless paupers in desperate need and heartless desire for the punishment of those who have sinned against us, when we have the incalculable treasury of Christ's satisfaction for sin that includes the making right of all wrongs, the healing of all wounds, the extinguishing of all enmity, the reconciling in love of erstwhile offending and offended parties? True forgiveness is no mere generous feeling that lets others off easy. It is based, instead, upon the costly work of Christ's atoning sacrifice. When asked and given, it effects reconciliation between alienated parties that is more strong, loving, and effecting of joyful restoration than what had obtained between those parties before the offense that separated them was ever committed. Where forgiveness is given and received, parties once at enmity due to sin are reconciled, and they feed no longer on the bitterness of guilty offense given and painful offense received. Instead, they together feed upon the sweet and satisfying heavenly manna that is the mercifully forgiving love of God in Christ.

Yours, a forgiven and forgiving sinner,

William Harrell

How We See Angels

Dear Friends,

Not long ago one of the young boys in our congregation approached me after a Sunday service and asked me whether I had ever seen an angel. I replied to him that I had seen many angels and that I was surprised to learn from him that he had never seen any angels. The boy, in turn, asked me why I should be surprised that he had never seen an angel. I responded that we both had been singing Psalm 91 that very morning and I reminded him of the words of vv.11,12 where we are told that the Lord gives His angels charge concerning us, to guard and uphold us. The boy replied that he did not see any angels just because we sang about them. This led me to the critical point, where I told the boy that we Christians do not walk by sight but by faith; that we see not so much with our eyes as we do with our ears, hearing and believing the Word of God. To my delight the boy with joy declared that he would thereafter believe God's Word concerning the angels and all else that the Lord reveals in Scripture. I felt a bit like Elisha, who prayed for his servant's eyes to be opened to behold the angelic hosts that were greater than the Syrian soldiers who had come to arrest the prophet (2 Kings 6:8ff).

In our day of scientific empiricism and philosophical materialism and hedonistic sensuality, it is common to find that many believers pay lip-service to the angels while practically denying them. Such believers follow an ancient path blazed by the Sadducees, who were the rationalistic opponents of Jesus. The Sadducees denied both the existence of angels as well as the possibility of the resurrection (Mt. 22:23). They and their followers—ancient and modern—fancy that by their superior understanding they have truer insight into the realities of life. Instead, they limit themselves to impoverished living and deny themselves the help and comforting blessing of the great and powerful celestial hosts who are deputed by our Lord to minister to us (Heb. 1:13,14), as they have ministered to the people of God through the ages, including our Savior's parents (Lk. 1:26ff; Mt. 1:20ff; 2:13, 19ff) as well as our Savior Himself (Mt. 4:11). Just one of these angels is seen to be so gloriously majestic and awesomely powerful, that when John was allowed a vision of him the apostle fell down to worship him (Rev. 19:10; 22:8,9). A host of these angelic beings announced the birth of our Redeemer (Lk. 2:8-15). Legions of angels were held in abeyance at the crucifixion of our Lord, ready to execute His will, whether it was to destroy the opponents of Jesus or to watch in amazement as the King of glory humbled Himself to be tortured, mocked, and executed as though He were a criminal and a blasphemer. Angels served as attendants at the resurrection of Jesus (Mt. 28:5; Lk. 24:4,5), and they will accompany Jesus when He returns on the day of judgment (Mk. 8:38).

It will be a cause of shame, confusion, and dread when on the final day men behold the glorious angelic hosts whom they have denied. It will be a day of embarrassment to many Christians as well, when they who maintained a practical ignorance of the angels learn that they are supposed to judge them (1 Cor. 6:3).

Why would any Christian want to be in company with those who deny these great servants of the Lord and of us? We do well to read and heed the teaching of God's Word regarding the angels. We shall find our fears vanquished and our afflictions comforted when we, by faith, reckon upon the reality of these angelic beings and rely upon the protecting service they render for us. We, of course, should not worship the angels as

some have attempted and others still seek to do. Yet, the tendency of most believers today is to under-rate, not to over-rate, these holy messengers of God.

Let us, then, pray that the Lord would open the eyes of our hearts, so that we might like Jacob of old behold the angels of God, ascending to and descending from heaven, in order to receive their instructions from our heavenly Father and to carry them out according to His perfect and prevailing wisdom, love, and power (Gen. 28:12). If we know we walk in company with such glorious celestial servants we shall be less fearful, less presumptuously inclined to sin, less anxious, less frustrated and compromising, and we shall be more faithful, fearless, and fruitful in our witness and work for our Savior. We shall also know greater joy and be filled with more gratitude to God for these holy angelic ministers whom He has charged to serve for our welfare.

Yours in a great company of redeemed men and holy angels,

William Harrell

Perspectives on Sin

Dear Friends,

The Lord has recently blessed us with a very challenging, comforting, and edifying Immanuel Bible Conference. Pastor Fred Sloan opened and developed the theme titled: God's Word and My Problems. Audio recordings of the four messages he gave are available through the sermons link on our church website (address listed on the back of our Congregational Record).

Among the many penetrating and practical insights Pastor Sloan shared with us, one of the most profound and important was dealing with the question of what sin looks like. From Genesis 3:6, we were asked to consider what we would have seen had we been with our first parents as witnesses to the action taking place in that verse. The action observed would have been a woman taking some fruit from a tree, eating it, and sharing it with her husband. Such action looks at worst innocent and harmless and at best considerate, generous, even loving. The only reason we know what Adam and Eve did in that verse was sinful is that we know from God's Word that the Lord had forbidden the action. Our sins often appear to us to be harmless, legitimate, even virtuous. Yet those same sins always appear to God as being rebellious, heinous, and blameworthy.

The point of our consideration of God's perspective in contrast with man's perspective of sin is that too often we weigh our own attitudes and actions in the faulty scales of human observation and opinion rather than in the holy and righteous scales of God's justice. A large part of the Christian life involves our learning to think God's thoughts after Him, and in His light to see things not as they appear to our darkened understanding but as they truly are in the perfect sight of God. Nowhere is this more vital than in our understanding the nature of our own sins. If we do not perceive our sins, or if we think of them as being but misdemeanors, then we fail not only to apprehend the justice of God but also the depth of our need for mercy as well as the magnitude of the Lord's saving mercy.

Let us return to consider further what we see Adam and Eve doing in Genesis 3:6 and how we see the Lord reacting to what they did. The divine response to an action wherein two people simply ate some fruit was the Lord's cursing of the beguiling serpent (Gen. 3:14,15), cursing of Eve (Gen. 3:16), cursing of Adam and of the whole world, including all of humanity to be descended from Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:17-19). God's reaction to the brief and simple action of two people is profound, extensive, and perpetual in its consequences. Clearly the Lord saw far more heinous and harmful features in the act than did our first parents or than do we, apart from our understanding and accepting the testimony of Scripture.

It is only through our reading and meditating upon the Word of God that we come to perceive the exceeding sinfulness of sin. Our first parents sinned against the goodness and lavish generosity of the God who had made them and the entire creation in which He had placed them. They sinned against the wisdom and sovereign authority of the God who had forbidden them to eat the fruit. The fact that they sinned against the infinite God entailed infinite consequences issuing from their sin. The fact that they heeded the insinuations of a snake that had done nothing for them and was itself a lower creature over which they were to have exercised dominion, and that they heeded the snake above the Word of the God who had done everything for them and should have been everything

to them, constituted a most heinous offense against their Lord. The fact that they desired to be as God—even above God, whom the serpent impugned with his insinuation that God was envious and lied when He said our parents would die—constituted attempted God-murder. The fact that they sinned as public persons, they being the source and Adam being the federal head of the human race, constituted massive infanticide. Hence, from God's Word we learn not only that sin is serious, but we glimpse at least some of the reasons why it is serious.

Surely we have been seeing the great contrast between how sin appears to men and how it is regarded by God in the series of sermons I have been currently preaching through Hosea. The people of Israel in Hosea's day were militarily strong and economically prosperous. They also were religiously active, multiplying altars (Hos. 8:11) and offering many sacrifices (Hos. 8:13). If we had lived in Hosea's day, we might have concluded that the people of Israel were spiritually strong and greatly blessed by the God whom they appeared to worship. Yet, the Lord shows us His perspective through the words of Hosea in which Israel is charged with faithlessness and manifold, extensive, and continual violation of God's holy Law (Hos. 4:1,2). They are idolatrous (Hos. 4:12) and guilty of spiritual harlotry (Hos. 9:1). Hence, God promises not to commend their spiritual hypocrisy, but to chastise them for it (Hos. 9:9). In 722 B.C. this promise was fulfilled when the Assyrians carried Israel away into captivity (Hos. 9:3).

What does sin in our lives look like? Are we seeking to answer that question by a superficial analysis of the appearance of the action, or do we measure our actions and the attitudes that prompt them by the standard of God's Word? If we judge ourselves rightly, we will not be judged by the God whose standard is the only one that matters.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Things Indifferent

Dear Friends,

When we want to know the boundaries and contours of right and wrong we consult the teaching of the Word of God, not our own feelings or natural reasoning (Prov. 3:5,7). Scripture clearly prescribes the things that are right and prohibits the things that are wrong. However, the Word of God also indicates to us that the Christian life is not a matter of our reducing all things into absolute categories of right or wrong. There are things indifferent, which in themselves are neither right nor wrong, with moral quality being in the attitude that prompts our use of or abstinence from those things. For example, whether a man's diet is restricted or expanded is a matter indifferent. It is neither right nor wrong for a man to eat only vegetables or to partake of meat. The Apostle Paul deals fully with this question of the use of or abstinence from things indifferent in Romans 14. If Scripture devotes an entire chapter to this matter in a letter which is the most full and clear theological articulation contained in the Bible, we do well to consider, understand, and abide by the Scriptural teaching on this subject.

Basically, we are to regard things indifferent with a holy, principled indifference. This means that we do not labor to impute moral value into those things that are neither sinful nor righteous in themselves. If we stay with the matter of one's diet that Paul deals with in Romans 14, we must learn to draw the line of legitimacy not between the items one eats, but rather between a responsible use of food and the abuse of food to which a glutton resorts. Our Lord considers how and why we use things indifferent, rather than the fact that we use such things. The degree of our use and the motive prompting our disposition toward such things, then, determines whether what is being done or not done is right or wrong. For example, a man may deny himself meat in an endeavor to reduce his fat intake and lower his cholesterol for the sake of enhancing his health in view of the Sixth Commandment. That would be a right abstinence from a thing indifferent. Another man may abstain from a sense of legalistic pride, and that would make the same act to be wrong and sinful.

We must admit that it would be easier for us to reduce all things into clear and absolute categories of right and wrong, but such a mindless and mechanical grasp of things is not what Scripture teaches. Rather, we are to grow in our understanding, discernment, and loving consideration for others, and nothing contributes to and manifests better our growth in such areas as does our disposition toward things indifferent. The man who exalts his opinion to an absolute moral standard for all is not wise and mature in the things of the Lord, but is childish and churlish in his conceit.

The right rule of our attitude and actions towards things indifferent is that we allow most charitable generosity toward others in their use of such things, while being more critically careful in our own use of such things. In this way we are inclined to be most lovingly respectful toward and considerate of others, while we avoid the intoxicating conceit that we know what is best for others more truly than they know for themselves.

This is not to say that things indifferent form an area of neutrality or meaninglessness in the Christian life. Some of the most deeply devout and precious demonstrations of godliness have been and can be manifested with things indifferent. The Rechabites, for example, refused to drink wine, not because it was sinful in itself so

to do, but because they used their abstinence as a way to honor their father (Jer. 35:1-11). Accordingly, they pressed something indifferent into something that was precious and loving for them, while not imposing their abstinence upon others. This sort of thing is right and precious only with one's own free and personal commitment. It cannot be made into a rule for others' piety.

Another example of such devotion being demonstrated with things indifferent is found with David's mighty men risking their lives to fetch water for him from the well of Bethlehem while the city was full of Philistines (2 Sam. 23:13-17). David did not issue a command for such water but merely expressed a desire; the men risked their lives to do what would please their king. What do we do to please our Lord? I do not mean merely to obey Him in our doing what He commands, but rather our perceiving what He desires and doing it for His pleasure? The whole system of free-will offerings in the Old Testament provided opportunities for God's people to show such sensitive and loving devotion. Our greater liberty in Christ affords us such opportunities as well. We are instructed by Scripture to try and learn what pleases our God (Eph. 5:10). Surely our generous charity toward others and our grateful use of or pious self-denial respecting the use of things indifferent pleases our Lord, who gave Himself voluntarily to redeem us.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Humility

Dear Friends,

Humility is a precious virtue that is highly commended by the Word of God. It is also a virtue too rarely possessed and practiced as well as too often misunderstood. The popular conception is one where weakness and mindless compliance characterize the attitude and actions of those who are humble. While it is true that meekness, gentleness, and kindness are aspects of true humility, nothing could be further removed from those who are genuinely humble than weakness and obsequiousness. Similarly, the notion that the humble are not aware of their humility is more a foolish myth than a fact. Moses was certainly not lying or destroying his humility when he wrote of himself that he was the meekest man on earth (Num. 12:3), nor was Jesus boasting arrogantly when He said that He was meek and humble in heart (Mt. 11:29).

If humility is not synonymous with weakness, what then are the facets of its true character? To answer this, we but need to consider the men mentioned above, whom we know from Scripture to be examples of humility. Moses was a man of strength, assertion, power, zeal, and compassion. Jesus showed courageous zeal when he cleansed the temple, apparent insensitivity when He ignored the pleas of the Canaanite woman who beseeched Him with cries for her demon-possessed daughter, He was angry with men's hardness of heart (Mk. 3:5), and He boldly castigated the Scribes and Pharisees. Were these strong actions inconsistent with the humility of these men? Perhaps Moses, who was himself a sinner, acted at times contrary to his virtue of humility, but Jesus, who was sinless and ever consistent in His holy walk, was surely acting boldly without compromising His meekness. Clearly, then, humility will at times manifest itself through its possessor's bold, frank, and seemingly hard actions, as well as through the patient gentleness that would be appropriate at other times.

Our understanding of humility cannot be formed on the basis of psychological analysis or sentimental feelings. The Bible makes clear to us that the starting point for humility is not our determination to act with meek gentleness toward all people in all situations. Instead, the starting point for genuine humility is one's subservient attitude before God. Accordingly, if God cries out against sin, so do His humble servants, such as the prophets; if God is grieved over men's hardness of heart, the humble are grieved; if God stoops to serve and save unworthy sinners, the humble follow the divine example (Phil. 2:1-11). Therefore, we should expect to find the truly humble acting at times as bold as lions and at other times as meek as lambs. The key to their attitudes and actions is found in their utter communion with, devotion to, and faithfulness toward the God whom they serve with humble gratitude and love.

Such humble devotion to the Lord is without the sort of fawning affectation that characterizes counterfeit humility. Genuine humility is an attitude of mindful and loving devotion to God. The humble person is mindful of the Lord and of His will revealed in His Word supremely above his being mindful of his own needs and desires or even those of other people. At its heart, humility is characterized by an adamant determination, on the part of its possessor, to know and obey the will of God, though such obedience should lead to the death of the one obeying (Phil. 2:8).

Through such supreme and loving regard for God, the humble also have higher regard for others than they do for themselves (Phil. 2:3). But this does not mean that the

humble render themselves uncritical servants to further the godless goals of others. True humility is godly humility, and those acting from such humility will ever seek and serve to move others into increasingly vital and blessed communion with the Lord. Their service may at times include strong cries of admonition or exhortation to those who are nurturing rather than mortifying their sin; at other times their service may consist of patient and gentle ministry of comfort and encouragement to those who may be growing weary in their course of well-doing. Whatever form the administration of the humble man's service may take, it always issues from a sense of blessed privilege, holy joy, and deepest gratitude that the humble find when they lie low at the foot of the throne of God's grace and glory. The service of the humble ever aims to move others to that place of supreme blessedness that only those who walk humbly with their God can enjoy. The humble have found and strive to share with others the secret that the way up is down, the way to highest, most glorious and everlasting life, is when one buries himself in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

Humbly yours,

William Harrell

The Royal Law of Love

Dear Friends,

When the lawyer asked Jesus to name the greatest of the Ten Commandments, our Lord answered far above what the inquirer asked or thought. The lawyer thought that the commandments of God could be separated and serialized. We all have a tendency to reduce and simplify complex commands in an attempt to comprehend them and to maximize our endeavor to perform them. However, God has joined the ten specifications of His moral law into a comprehensive whole that no man can put asunder. Jesus emphasized this when He summarized the Ten Commandments under two heads that are inseparably fused together and fulfilled only by love. We are to love God and man, not God or man, not even God without man. As John rightly tells us, we cannot say truly that we love God whom we have not seen while hating our brother whom we do see (1 Jn. 4:20). This comprehensive and inseparable nature of the moral law is also expressed by James when he writes that our violation of one commandment entails our violation of all of them (James 2:11).

Our knowing the law is one thing while our doing it is another. Our knowing that all of the commandments form a coherent whole is the objective aspect of the matter, while the spirit in which we obey the law is the subjective aspect. The spirit of such obedience is defined when Jesus speaks of love. We are to love God; we are to love man.

Too often we conceive of the violation of the law of God in terms of obvious, outward transgressions. Added to this, we can tend to rank the Lord's commandments in a way that Jesus makes impossible by His summation of the law. For example, we can reckon sins against the first four commandments to be of greater heinousness than those against the second table of the law. Or we can regard murdering a man as something worse than coveting his goods. To some extent, these assessments are valid. However, when we recall that all sins are sins against the God who made us and others and who governs and judges us according to His moral law, we then realize that to violate any commandment to any extent is to commit sin against the Lord who gave the entire law—what the Puritans aptly referred to as God murder.

While our right consideration of the objective dimension of the Ten Commandments is essential, such consideration takes us no further than our being in the company of the devils who know God's law and tremble. It is with the quality of love that we must be more concerned than with the character of the commandments. It is not a right knowledge of the law that we lack so much as it is a right disposition towards the law.

No sinners are saved by their perfect knowledge of the law. We are justified by faith; yet faith works itself out in love (Gal. 5:6). We are commanded by our Lord to love God and man. We are to speak and act the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). The blessing of God causing all things to work together for good is upon those who love Him (Rom. 8:28). The royal law is love (Jas. 2:8).

We are rightly appalled when we or others commit outward transgressions of the law of God. Yet, as the Pharisees who caught the adulterous woman, we can too readily focus upon the formal act of sin—especially in others—while failing to perceive its empowering principle. Our formal violations of the law may vary greatly. Some men's sins are obvious because they break out in open acts; the sins of others become apparent

only in the Day of Judgment because they are now indulged in attitude. Yet, not one of us is without sin. The root of sin, its very heart, is our failure to love God and man.

Love is the sweet fruit of saving faith. By faith we believe God loves us, and we, in turn, gratefully love Him and others as He has loved us. Love is the inimitable virtue. The devil can imitate light, but not love (1 Jn. 4:16-19). Love is the head and heart of the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives (Gal. 5:22,23). Love excels the words of men and angels; it never fails but endures forever and is greater than faith, which is its root, and hope which encourages it through the tests of this earthly pilgrimage. (1 Cor. 13:1,8,13).

Jesus tells us that heaven and earth will pass away, but that His Word will abide forever. The same can be said of those who keep His Word because they love Him who is the eternally living Word (1 Jn. 2: 17). So, let us not denigrate love as though it were mere sentiment and as if our failure to love God and man were minor failings in comparison with the sins of searing or even killing. Failure to love is the crowing crime and the supreme sin. So, beloved, let us fulfill the royal law of love.

Yours lovingly,
William Harrell

The Right Revolution

Dear Friends,

When Paul and his missionary companions brought the gospel of salvation to the Greek city of Thessalonica, opposition arose against them and they were characterized by their opponents as being men who were turning the world upside down (Acts 17:6). The natural man always assumes that apart from a few political adjustments, economic improvements, and personal refinements, the world is right side up. Therefore, when a call comes to the natural man to acknowledge his sinful rebellion from and guilt before God and his need to repent and to trust for his salvation a Man who some 2,000 years ago was executed as a criminal, his reaction will be naturally to charge the bearers of such gospel tidings with disturbing the peace of the world. But it was not Christ and His apostles and disciples who turned the world upside down. Adam was responsible for that awful revolution. Jesus came not to turn the world upside down, but to turn it right side up and to restore it to that original goodness that characterized the world that God had created before Adam had sinned and God had cursed the earth.

Those who have been made regenerate in Christ and who think, feel, speak, act, and live by faith perceive that the natural man and his world are badly gone wrong and that the only true hope of restoration is to be found in the gospel of salvation through Christ. By faith we perceive that God works counter to the natural (but not normal) order of human impulses, expectations, and conventions. Faith accepts the gracious divine propriety by which the Lord chose not Abraham's oldest son, Ishmael, but rather his younger son of covenant promise, Isaac. Faith enables us to see and accept this divine priority in the Lord's choice not of Isaac's first-born son, Esau, but of Esau's younger brother, Jacob. The divine primacy among the sons of Jacob was divinely conferred not upon Jacob's oldest son, Reuben, but upon the patriarch's penultimately youngest son, Joseph in his day, and upon Jacob's fourth-born son, Judah beyond Joseph's day.

Throughout the account of Scripture this revolutionary pattern continues. The divine choice was upon none of Jesse's older sons, but rather upon young David, who was naturally so lightly esteemed by his own father that it did not even occur to Jesse that David should have been presented to Samuel as a candidate for royal anointing. We see the pattern also in the fact that God did not choose to enter into covenant relation with any of the great nations and empires of the world, but only with tiny Israel. We also see the pattern in the way that God uses weakness to overcome the strong and foolishness to confound the wise. Our Lord ever humbles the proud and exalts the lowly.

Because our God is in process of turning the world right side up through the propagation and application of the gospel, we should learn not to expect our Lord to bless us through His satisfying of our natural desires for sensual gratification, physical comfort, material prosperity, and the success of our plans and projects. Instead, we should learn to look for the blessing of our wise, loving, and almighty heavenly Father in defeats, disappointments, trials, and afflictions. The thorns in our flesh we naturally curse, our God uses to multiply our spiritual blessing.

This truth shines throughout the revelation of God in Scripture. We may think of it as being paradoxical that our God brings blessing for His people supremely out of the curse Christ bore for us on the cross and also through the situations and circumstances that believers experience which the natural man would regard as being curses. But it is

all part of the divine turning of the world right side up, where man's true and highest everlasting good is found when he exalts God and humbles himself under the Lord's mighty hand. The way the world is now, man makes himself—not God—to be the upside of the world, and consequently he finds no lasting good, and little, if any, temporal enjoyment.

Let us grow in our understanding of our Lord's blessed revolutionary operations in our world and in our lives. Let us learn increasingly to look for His pleasures amidst the pains that He ordains to come upon us, and to expect a feast, not from the storehouses of the world, but from the crumbs that fall from His table. Let us be guided by His servants, such as Paul and Silas, who could see amidst their dark and painful imprisonment in Philippi cause not for questioning the wisdom, power, and love of God, but rather for praying to Him and praising Him. Let us learn to see and rejoice in the fact that our God is turning our world right side up, for His glory and our good.

Yours learning that the way up is down,
William Harrell

Revolutionary Vision

Dear Friends,

In last month's Record I wrote about how the unbelievers' charge that Christ and His disciples were turning the world upside down was in fact a matter of their misapprehension of the reality of Christ and His servants turning the world right side up. It was the sin of the first Adam that turned the world upside down; it is the righteous and gracious work of the Second Adam that is restoring the good and right supremacy of God over man. While sinners remain committed to being their own gods as they suppress their knowledge of the one true God in unrighteousness, they succeed only in digging themselves ever deeper into guilt, corruption, and misery. Meanwhile, those who acknowledge and submit to the supremacy of God through Christ are increasingly exalted and empowered.

In this month's letter, I would like to draw out some of the personal and practical implications of our understanding the reality of this restoration of the true, right, and blessed priority of the supreme reign of God over all things. In essence, the practical application of this teaching is two-fold: 1) we are not to trust our immediate perception and apprehension of our circumstances, 2) but we are by faith to trust in and rely upon our saving and sovereign God. This is precisely what wise and godly Solomon tells us when he writes in Prov. 3:5,6 that we must trust in the Lord with all of our being while resisting the temptation to rely on our own finite and fallible understanding.

It is a challenging thing for us not to rely on our own understanding. We all have a deep-seated tendency to accept what our senses perceive and to seek, through our own mental analysis, our understanding of the perceived data. Such thinking and acting in accordance with this tendency can go badly wrong, even with those who are disciples of Christ who seek to know and serve their Lord. Recall how Peter sought to keep Jesus from going to the cross. Surely Peter's urging of Jesus resulted from his reasonable and even loving regard for his Lord. However, Jesus characterized it as having a satanic origin when He rebuked Peter with the words: Get behind Me, Satan...you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's. (Mt. 16:23). To Peter, the notion of Jesus going to the cross was tantamount to the world being turned upside down, when, in fact, it was through the cross that Jesus turned the world right side up.

Consider also the two disciples who walked with Jesus on the Emmaus road (Lk. 24:13-35). They saw Jesus with their eyes and heard Him speak with their ears. They also interpreted the words of our risen Lord through the grid of their own natural understanding rather than through faith in Christ as He had been revealed to them in Scripture. Therefore, when Jesus asked them what they had been discussing before He joined them on their walk, they reacted as if He were the only one in Jerusalem who was ignorant of what had happened there. They then went on to relate how their hopes in Israel's redemption had been dashed by the crucifixion of Jesus. The fact that they thought and spoke this way to the very Jesus who had redeemed His people by His death, and who had been raised from the dead to give them a living hope (contrary to their expectations but not contrary to the teaching of Scripture), makes clear how badly mistaken even devoted disciples of Christ can be when they assume that they can apprehend reality through their natural, unrevolutionized thinking.

We can also fail to recognize God's answers to our prayers when we consider that this upside down world is all that there is and fail to consider that our Christ is busy turning it right side up. In Revelation 8 we are told of John's vision of the prayers of the saints ascending to God and being answered with thunder and lightening and an earthquake on the earth. The saints almost certainly were not praying for such cosmic disturbances, but they were granted by God in answer to their prayers. The point is that if we think in terms of the upside down order of the world, we will be blind to the workings of God in answer to our prayers that are turning the world right side up.

If we are not to rely on our own understanding that has become so conditioned by the inverted world order, on what are we to rely for our understanding and acting in our circumstances? We are to trust in our Lord with all of our heart. We are to apprehend Him by faith, as we submit to the mind-transforming revelation of His Person and work in His Word. When we by faith see our God, then in His light we shall see the light of His gracious, infallibly wise, unchangeably loving, and omnipotently causing of all things to work together for our good (Rom. 8:28). If we take our cue from the Lord of our circumstances and not from our faulty apprehension of those circumstances—an apprehension usually agitated by the sorry counselors of our fears and the sinister insinuations of Satan—then we shall find ourselves comforted when we perceive our Christ sitting at the right hand of God until all of His enemies are made to be His footstool and ours in Him.

At this time the world is in an increasing panic due to what portends to be a global economic meltdown. Could it be that this dissolving of unrighteous mammon is the result of the Sun of righteousness rising in answer to the prayers of his Church, coming to us with healing and lasting treasures to replace the idolatrous trinkets that choke our world today?

Yours in Christ's blessed security,

William Harrell

Faith and the Lord's Supper

Dear Friends,

For the past year or so I have been making my way slowly through the reading of a series of sermons preached on Hebrews 11 by the Puritan, Thomas Manton. The book containing these sermons is titled *By Faith* and it is published by The Banner of Truth Trust. Most recently I have been reading from this wonderful volume a sermon that deals with the question of the necessity and working of faith in our partaking of the Lord's Supper. I intend to share some of Manton's insights with you in this month's letter.

We begin with Manton writing that: We do not come that faith may be forgotten, but we must bring it along with us, that it may be strengthened and confirmed. (p. 650). Here we are taught that our profit in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper resides not in a mechanical apprehension of the emblems of Christ's body and blood, as though they contained magical power. We are rather to examine ourselves to see if we are in the faith, and whether that faith is operative in us. Our faith in God through Christ by the Holy Spirit gives us title and interest in this sacrament. The Supper is not a converting ordinance that begets faith in us, but rather a sustaining ordinance that vividly provokes the exercise of our faith in Christ and strengthens that faith so exercised.

Manton further writes: Without faith we shall want an eye, we cannot discern the Lord's body, nor have a true sense and use of these spiritual mysteries; and without faith we shall want a hand thankfully to take what God offers, even Christ and all his benefits; and without faith we shall want a mouth to feed upon Christ, that we may suck and draw life and strength from him. (p. 651). With our physical eyes we all behold the bread and wine that represent the incarnation of the Son of God and, because the wine is separated from the bread, His death by which He redeemed His people. With our physical hands, we take to ourselves these elements, and with our physical mouths we feed upon them. All of these actions can be performed without faith. But without faith our souls neither perceive nor are nourished upon the person and work of Christ that the physical elements in the Supper signify to us. It is not the divine intention in this sacrament that we handle bits of bread and cups of wine and nourish to a very small and temporary degree our physical bodies. Faith gives us spiritual powers of perception to see, handle, feed upon, and be lastingly nourished by Christ in the Lord's Supper.

But what if our faith is weak and our assurance is uncertain as we come to the Lord's Supper? Manton rightly says: It is the thing, and not the certainty of the thing, that is necessary. (p. 652). While a strong faith that has no doubt in the spiritual provision that the Lord makes for us in the tangible form of the Supper is most pleasing and honoring to God, He ever receives and blesses those who come to Him crying: I believe, Lord, help my unbelief. In fact, as Manton goes on to say about the obscuring power of unbelief...usually mists and clouds are dispersed in the sacrament. Look, as Jesus was known to his disciples in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30,31), so all jealousies and misunderstandings between God and his people are removed, and our being in Christ is more evidenced, which was before dark, doubtful, and litigious. (p. 652). In other words, faith convinces us no more to doubt in the substance and nourishing power of Christ in us as the hope of our glory than to doubt in the reality of the bread and wine or their potency to nourish our bodies.

But what are we to do about our sinfulness when we come to the Lord's Supper? We are exhorted in Scripture to examine ourselves so that we might come to this nourishing sacrament in a manner worthy of the Lord. This means that we search our lives—our thoughts, words, and actions—and confess our sins to God and seek to be reconciled to the people against whom we have sinned. But such self-examination will never yield a sense of sinlessness to any of us. Manton tells us: Come judging and condemning yourselves, and humbled under the sense of your own vileness and unworthiness, that Jesus Christ may be more sweet to you. (p. 652). In this instruction, Manton is not saying that we are to be carelessly indifferent to our sins, and still less is he saying that we should boast in them. What he is saying is that faith makes us to be shrewd wrestlers with God, as were Jacob and the Canaanite woman. Manton puts it this way: ...though they cannot say with Paul in one place, viz., (Gal. 2:26), 'Who loved me and gave himself for me'; yet they can say with Paul in another place, viz., (1 Tim 1:15), 'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation; that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.' (p. 653). This is how we humble ourselves to be dogs, content to sit at the Master's table to feed upon the crumbs that fall to us and are a feast to us precisely because they have come to us from our merciful Lord. May such faith ignite in us a hunger for that which our saving God delights to give to us, not in crumbs, but in feasting abundance.

Your fellow-feaster upon Christ,

William Harrell

Wickedness and Wretchedness

Dear Friends,

If we are to live healthy spiritual and emotional lives as believers, it is vital that we understand clearly the true character of the hearts of those who are regenerated by God's Holy Spirit. In particular, it is imperative that we understand the distinction between wickedness and wretchedness. The Bible tells us that the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9), while the Apostle Paul declares himself to be a wretched man (Rom. 7:24). How are we to understand these declarations? Surely they describe the heart of the natural man. But how, if at all, do they apply to those who are regenerated? Are the hearts of believers simply less wicked and wretched than they were prior to their regeneration? This appears to be the common assumption. Yet, it is an erroneous and damaging assumption.

Serious confusion of understanding and great anguish of soul result when we wrongly regard the words wicked and wretched as being synonymous. We do well, therefore, carefully to examine these two terms, noting especially any differences between them. The wicked man is throughout Scripture described in terms of his being evil, guilty, and offensive. The wicked are consistently contrasted with the righteous who are regarded as being good, just, and submissive to God. The Day of Judgment will be a time when the wicked and the righteous will be separated from each other (Mt. 13:49), but it will not be a day when those who are wicked are made righteous. Therefore, it should be clear to us that we who are in Christ ought not to consider ourselves or our brethren in Christ to be in any sense wicked. We may act like the wicked at times, but such action, as we shall see from what follows, issues from our wretchedness, not from wickedness.

When we consider the definition of the words used in Scripture that are translated wretched we can appreciate how greatly different wickedness is from wretchedness. The wretched man is one who is distressed, weak, and miserable. In other words, the wicked man is evil, while the wretched man suffers evil; the wicked man desires to do evil, whereas the wretched man deplores his evil doings; the wicked offends because he is strongly driven by his evil desires, while the wretched offends as a result of the weakness and imperfections of his righteous nature that is undergoing the process of sanctification. This distinction holds even when we consider what Jeremiah says about the heart being deceitful and desperately wicked, and even if we regard what he says there to apply to the hearts of the regenerate. This is so because the word in Jer. 17:9 that is translated in both the King James and the New King James versions as wicked, comes from a Hebrew word that means weak, sick, frail, incurable.

The implications of our believing ourselves and our brethren in Christ to be even partly wicked are bitter and painful for ourselves and for others. Such erroneous belief invariably leads us to have low esteem for our own thoughts, motives, words, and actions, and for those of our brethren, and also to esteem lightly the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Lord in our lives. It is supremely difficult for us to love our brethren and to exercise the judgment of charity toward them when we are convinced that they are self-deceived and wicked souls who ever desire to sin against God, to reject His Law, and to spurn His grace. How difficult, if not impossible, it is for us to be filled with loving gratitude to God and with the joy of the Lord that is our strength when we are convinced

that He has done little more in us than to make us only a bit less wicked than are the unregenerate, while He demands that we be perfect as He is perfect.

When Scripture tells us that we are new creatures in Christ and that for us all things are new (2 Cor. 5:17), that we were dead in sin but now we have been raised up to eternal life by God in Christ (Eph. 2:5,6), and that the dominion of sin has been broken in our lives (Rom. 6:1-14), the Word of God is clearly informing us that we are no longer wicked but are righteous, not only in status, but also in disposition of heart by which we hate sin and hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But if we are no longer wicked, why are we wretched? As Paul makes clear, that wretchedness does not come from our new hearts and transformed minds (Rom. 7:15-23). Rather, it comes from our flesh (Rom. 7:18), or what he also calls the body this death (Rom. 7:24). What this means is not that our physical bodies are any more evil or more difficult for God to redeem and sanctify than are our hearts and minds. Rather, it means that so long as we are in this life, we drag around with us the dead remains of what we once were apart from Christ. Those remains annoy us and serve to retard our spiritual progress in sanctification. They also exert a kind of momentum whereby unless we are vigilant to let the Word of Christ dwell richly in us, directing our way and empowering us in that way, we shall revert, at least for a time, to old sinful patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting. But such reversions cause us grief, not gladness, and they result from our weakness and frailty, not from wickedness.

If we believe ourselves to be wicked, we shall seek to hide our shame with fig-leaves of our denials and the filthy rags of our own attempted righteousness, and we shall despise our brethren, whom we suspect to be at least as wicked as we think ourselves to be. We shall also resent the Lord as we wrongly believe that He expects wicked men to do righteous deeds. When we know ourselves to be fundamentally righteous and incidentally wretched, we cry to God for mercy and we find mercy abundantly supplied to us by God (Rom.7:25). In that merciful provision we rejoice in the deepening realization that for us, there is now no condemnation from our God (Rom 8:1). In turn, we who have tasted such divine mercy delight with patience and loving kindness to show mercy to our brethren who, like us, are distressed by frailties from which they desire liberation.

Yours in the merciful deliverance of our Lord,

William Harrell