

## God's Timing

Dear Friends,

Several days ago I began to formulate some thoughts on what I considered an important and edifying theme for me to address in the letter I am now writing. When such thoughts occur I have learned to jot down some notes to refresh my memory at the later time when my actual writing would take place. However, in this case I was not able to jot down my thoughts and now, alas, I cannot recall them! For this failure I could blame and upbraid myself but each time I begin to do so I become strongly conscious of the critical nature of timing in all things we do in our current space/time world. It may be that now is not the best time for a treatment of this forgotten matter to appear in our Record. Perhaps I need more time to grow in grace and knowledge so that I may better express this matter in the future. It may also be that some members of our flock would have critical need of this forgotten matter weeks or months from now, and would be then more inclined to read a Minister's Letter than they are now. I do know that our Lord is wisely and lovingly sovereign over the timing of all things. He also anticipates and uses our weaknesses, such as forgetfulness, for His glory and for our good. These truths remind me of how thoroughly economical our God is in His use of all things in our lives.

It is tempting for us to regard such things as waiting or even resting and recuperating from work or injury or sickness as the wasting of time. The truth is that our Lord accomplishes some of His most significant works of sanctification in us when we are doing what we regard as nothing. Our very survival requires that we spend approximately a third of every day of our lives in a state of sleep that resembles the inactivity of death. This fact should alert us to the reality that we are not to consider ourselves perpetually on call for our labors. If we were, we would be called and enabled by God to be effectively alert and active at all hours of all days.

But even as we sleep, there are processes going on within our bodies, minds, emotions, and souls that are essential not only for our enjoyable and effectual living and producing, but even for our survival. These processes have nothing to do with our actions and everything to do with our state of prolonged and unconscious inactivity in our beds each night. When we sleep, it is not we who recharge ourselves, but it is our Lord, giving to us that sleep whereby we are recharged according to the workings of the bodily and psychological systems that are part of our being fearfully and wonderfully made by Him.

While it is true that God's Word makes clear that our diligence and energetic working for His glory and for the good of His people are virtues that we should nurture and employ, it is also true that Scripture repeatedly extols even more highly the more serene virtues of our trusting in the Lord, of our patiently waiting upon Him for His divine initiative, and of our praying with our hearts and souls while our hands and feet are inactive.

Our Lord has given to us aspects of His grace that wonderfully comport with these more serene virtues. He has provided us with comfort, with assurance, with hope—all of which are designed to incline us with cheerfulness and gratitude to wait preparedly until we are called to work productively.

When we lose sight of the vital importance of right timing and of our exercising the serene virtues as we wait on our Lord, we become not better servants of our Lord, but rather are worse. We become easily frustrated and testy; we grow anxious within ourselves and give ourselves to rash actions when we fall into the trap of thinking that our notions of timing are infallible and essential to the world's welfare.

Suppose the disciples had visited the tomb of our Lord a day before He was raised from the dead? What would they have found there? They would have encountered a sealed grave and a squad of soldiers, all of which would have declared that the worst fears of the disciples had been realized, and that their Lord was gone and with Him the consolation of Israel had vanished. Suppose they, in face of these things, had determined to take matters into their own hands and had acted to overcome the soldiers guarding the tomb, to break its seal and roll away the large rock. What would they have found but a corpse? Too often we push our artificial deadlines in determination to hasten the resurrection of our shattered hopes and decimated productions. What do we get for our actions attempted with such misguided timing? We turn up barren ground and expose the corpses of our hopes. Then we are worse for our endeavors.

Timing is critical in our spiritual pilgrimage. Let us, therefore, seek to learn the pacing of our Lord's movements and wait upon, walk with, and follow Him accordingly.

Yours still learning patience,

William Harrell

## God's Pacing

Dear Friends,

In last month's Record I wrote concerning the matter of the Lord's timing in His dealings with us and with all things in His creation. This month I write to share with you some thoughts regarding the pace at which our Lord tends to work.

We who are all fallen creatures living in our cursed world of time and space tend to think that anything worth doing is worth doing quickly. We are, by nature, impatient, and our impatience is a fruit of our impotence. Therefore when we consider our almighty God, we reckon that if He has all power to effect His good and holy will, He should use that power to effect His plans and purposes quickly. Yet, our God,

who has power to create the world in an instant, brought all of creation into being over the measured course of six days. Our Lord can, and at times does, act with omnipotent swiftness. Jesus determined to heal the man with the withered hand on a certain Sabbath and not wait another day to do so. He did this even though the man's hand had been withered for some time and the Savior waiting only one more day to heal that hand would have avoided provoking the Pharisees' murderous rage (Mt. 12:10ff; Mk. 3:3 ff; Lk. 6:6 ff). Yet our Lord had manifold reasons for such swift action on that Sabbath, not least of which was to have that miracle serve as a sign that whereas our God is slow to anger He is swift to bring upon us His compassionate mercy.

There are times when our Lord expects us to move at a swift pace. God gave the Israelites one day at Kadesh-barnea to follow Moses' leading them into the Promised Land (Num. 13,14). After the people refused to follow the divine leading, they were accordingly told that the Lord would put them to death in the wilderness over the course of forty years. When, on the very next day, the people had repented and sought to go into the land, they were struck down by the Amalekites and Canaanites (Num. 14:39-45).

There are times when swift movements are to characterize our actions as well as the actions of our Lord. However, the usual course for God and for us is one of a measured and gradually unfolding pace. Even when we are told to run the race of our pilgrimage (Heb. 12:1,2), it is clear that we are in a distance run requiring that we find and keep to a sustainable pace. So many of the biblical images of sowing and reaping, building, and growing speak to us of this slow pace that makes gradual but sure progress.

I was deeply impressed with this matter of patient and persistent movement in a section of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians through which I have recently preached. In that section (chs. 8,9) the apostle writes at what first appears to be painful and needless length and glacially advancing progress concerning the matter of Christian giving. Could Paul not have briefly addressed this matter and quickly moved on? Was Paul not an apostle and could he not rightly have pointed out that because God in Christ had given to believers infinitely it was the duty of believers to give with swift and generous impulse? Paul could have expressed himself that curtly. However, precisely because he was an apostle of Christ, he took great pains and considerable time, not to compel the Corinthians to give, but to awaken their apprehensions of the Lord's love for them and their love for the Lord and for their needy brethren so that they would give cheerfully.

It is our impulse to compel that leads us to act quickly and to demand quick action from others. The holy and loving compassions of the Lord that we apprehend by faith and that are forming in us through the fruit of the Holy Spirit blessedly restrain us from harsh and rash domination and incline us, instead, to the tender, kind, patient, and gentle appeals of love. Accordingly, Paul does not order his readers, by his apostolic authority, immediately to rectify their slack giving. Instead, he gently extends the liberating cords of truth and love to his spiritual children who had become stalled in their performance of a good work. He aims not at the low target of commanding outward performance, but rather at the high target of encouraging his readers by his loving instruction and patient appeals so that they would be inwardly

and freely compelled to give by their love for the Lord, for Paul, and for their needy brethren for whom their gift was bound.

The arousing and communication of such love takes time. The right perception of it and production of it in the hearts of those who receive it takes time. Our God, who is love, moves in most of His dealings with us at such a gradual pace precisely because He is never concerned to make us do His will but is always concerned that we should clearly apprehend His love in His revealed will and by His grace obey Him in loving gratitude. Our God, who is love, is Himself committed to taking as much time as necessary to foster the loving tie that binds us to Him and to one another in Him. We, who are beginning to love in obedience to the Great Commandment, should also allow our pace in our living as well as the pace of our brethren in their living, to become more patient in accordance with the priority we place upon the nurture of such love.

Gently and patiently yours,

William Harrell

## **Dying to Self-justification**

Dear Friends,

One of the many glorious aspects of our justification is that there is now for those of us in Christ no condemnation (Rom. 8:1). However, this truth about us is one thing, our vitally experiencing the glorious liberty of this truth is quite another matter. As with all truth, our practical experience of our justification is something we must grow into as we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord. A measure of our need to grow in this truth is the degree to which we still seek to justify ourselves.

It is typical for a sinful soul to be pre-occupied with self-justification. When Adam was asked by God whether he had sinned, our first father did not confess his sin but rather sought to justify himself by blaming his wife and God Himself for his predicament, saying: The woman whom Thou gavest to me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate. (Gen. 3:12). As ones who are born sinners, we come into the world seeking to hide our shame by our own devices and escape our guilt by our self-justifying proclivities. When, by God's saving mercy, we become new creatures in Christ, we are definitively freed from the dominion and guilt of our sins. However, we are progressively being liberated from our corruption and misery. It is because of this progressive nature of our sanctification—of our being actually made righteous in addition to our having the righteousness of Christ imputed to us—that we still wrestle with the remnants of our sin. Our wrestling with growing skill and effectiveness is something that develops in us over the course of time.

A common mistake that we make as novice spiritual wrestlers is when we allow ourselves to be maneuvered by the devil and by the examples and pressures of the unregenerate into a self-justifying mode. In that mode, we try to explain why we are not quite so bad as we are charged by others to be. We will deny what we feel cannot be proven; we will point to mitigating factors in an endeavor to lessen our culpability; we will counter-charge the ones who accuse us in an attempt to deflect attention from our wrong to the greater wrongs of our accusers. Yet, such self-justifying tactics rarely succeed to any degree and often fail totally to extricate us from the charges we face from those accusing us. Furthermore, when we seek time and again to justify ourselves to others, it is always an exhausting effort that takes an increasing toll on us.

Perhaps the most damaging aspect of our attempts at self-justification is that we actually blind ourselves to the truth that alone can set us free. When our pre-occupation is to obtain an acquittal from the charges of others, we delude ourselves into believing our own concocted defenses. This is what the Apostle John means when he writes that if we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and have no truth in us (1 Jn. 1:8). It is not of the nature of our justification in Christ that it makes our sins disappear as though they never existed. Rather, we are justified in Christ because all of the sins we have in fact committed have been imputed to Christ while His righteousness has been imputed to us. By our self-justification we seek to deny our sin and yet our sin remains. By God's justification in Christ we confess our sins, owning them as fully as we are able to do, and yet we are not condemned for those sins because Christ, our penal substitute, has already been condemned in our place. Our blinding ourselves and trying to blind others to our faults does nothing to rectify our faults. Our blinding ourselves also extends to our being oblivious to the sweet and potent mercies of God in Christ whereby our sins and harmful effects of our sins are confessed by us and forgiven by God, and we are cleansed and healed.

Our self-justification also blinds us to the immeasurable and unchangeable love of God in Christ. If we fail rightly to reckon upon our justification in Christ when we are charged by men and devils, and choose in our defense to rely instead on our own self-justifying efforts, we will also find ourselves increasingly relying on self-justification in our stand before our holy God. Accordingly, we will become like the one talent man in the Gospels who regarded his master as being hard and demanding and who relied on his own devices to justify him before his master in the day of reckoning.

It is so wrong, so damaging, and so unnecessary for believers in Christ to indulge in self-justification. It is Jesus who with masterful effectiveness drove away all of the accusers of the woman caught in adultery. Neither did He condemn her. Can we not trust Him in similar fashion to deal lovingly and graciously with us in our sins, as He continues to save us from them to the uttermost? Let us learn to be more candid and confessing with our sins as we rely on our Savior's perfect justification and refuse to return to our useless self-justification.

Yours forgiven and rejoicing,

William Harrell

## The Curse of Confused Understanding

Dear Friends,

When the Lord confused the languages as people were building the tower of Babel, the confusion struck deeper than at the words people spoke. While the Lord's curse touched the tongues of sinners, the true divine aim was a frustration of people's understanding (Gen. 11:7). With their confused communication the people scattered from each other (Gen. 11:8,9). This alerts us to something we experience commonly. We do not grow close to those we cannot understand. At best, we keep a distance from those who fail to understand us and whose thoughts we cannot grasp. At worst, we fear and hate them, regarding them as potential threats to us.

In Christ, the divine curse of such mutual alienation begins to be overcome. The miracle at the Day of Pentecost enabled the various foreigners gathered in Jerusalem each to hear in his own language the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:1-11). This was but a token, however, of the reversal of that confusion that reigns in the mind and hearts and is expressed through the mouths of sinners.

Since the aim of the Lord in His confusing people's languages was to confuse their understanding, we should not be surprised to discover that alienation due to misunderstanding takes place even among people who speak the same language. We still experience poor communication more often than not. Friends and brethren in Christ, parents and children, husbands and wives—all must struggle to achieve better communication with each other or settle into a pattern of withdrawal into themselves and avoidance of others.

When the Apostle Peter calls for Christian husbands to live in an understanding way with their wives (1 Pet. 3:7), he is telling us how badly confused is all of our communication. If a man knows and is known by his wife better than any other person on earth, and he must strive to understand his own wife, surely that indicates that whatever we think we know about others with whom we are less intimate is based more on ignorance than understanding. But even in a good marriage, a couple can at times slip into assuming they are being understood when they speak and that they are understanding when they listen to each other. Such an assumption can be damaging to this most intimate of all relationships as well as to all other relationships.

So what are we to do? We begin by recognizing how badly damaged our powers of perceiving and expressing truly are. Recall how quickly and radically Adam's perception and understanding of his God and of his wife changed for the worse after he had sinned. In Christ, we are only gradually being healed from our damaged powers of understanding. Therefore, we are in a better position to understand others and be understood by them when we assume, not that we have keenly working powers of comprehension and expression, but instead that we are in need of an interpreter. If we want to grow closer to others, we cannot achieve such intimacy by our remaining in our own world of thoughts and expressions while putting the burden on others to speak and understand our language. We must commit ourselves to becoming multilingual with the language of the heart. This means that we learn to

hear and to speak the language not of mere information but of feeling as well. When we do not factor in the expressions of emotion as well as thoughts, we are left with half a language, and not necessarily the most expressive half.

Love prompts us to grow in mutually blessed relationship with others. Those others do not tell us in clear words that they are ashamed and filled with fears and that they desperately desire security and loving respect from others. They do not tell us these things, but God, who is our interpreter, does tell us this in His Word. That is why He instructs us to be quick to listen and slow to speak. And when we listen, as well as speak, we should be increasingly tuned not only to the words of the intellect but also to the cries of the heart. Then we will be more capable and inclined to treat one another with the gentle and patient love that is the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Also when we listen to others, we should resist the arrogant conceit of telling them what they should think and how they should feel at a given time. That is not our accepting them in love but rather our demanding of them a performance to suit our desires. What we should always want to know is the real person. What we should ever desire and strive to communicate to them is our love for them in Christ. Then, in that shining of Christ in us, they and we will grow together by the grace and to the glory of our God who has loved us. This is all we really need to understand.

Affectionately,

William Harrell

## **The Majesty of Meekness**

Dear Friends,

It is clear that the Bible commends the quality of meekness, but what is our understanding of this virtue? Why is it commended to us, and what are its qualities?

Most people clearly apprehend that humility is characterized by lowliness. We understand this because it is often contrasted with pride whereby a person boasts and puffs himself up in the sight of others. But why is pride considered a vice? Part of the answer is that no person can truly and rightly exalt himself because we are all sinners, and sinners, however capable and successful in worldly things they may become, remain essentially guilty in God's sight and corrupt in themselves. For sinners, any claim to exalted status is but posturing pretense with no reality. That is why pride is deemed in Scripture a puffing up. In contrast, humility involves our honest recognition and acceptance of the truth that we have debased ourselves by our sinfulness.

Yet this is only part of humility and the least significant part. In fact, if we limit the concept of meekness entirely to our recognition of our degraded sinfulness, we will not be considering true humility at all. There are features to genuine meekness that set it radically apart from our merely being attuned to our essential weakness and brokenness in sin. In fact, one of those features is actually strength. Only those who are truly powerful and exalted can be humble, because only they can voluntarily lower themselves to serve others. Our accepting and acting with appropriate self-defacing lowliness is simply a matter of our honest confession of our essential worthlessness. We do not by such a confession lower ourselves but rather open our eyes to see and our mouths to tell of our prostration.

There is a voluntary feature that is essential to humility. Our recognizing our sinful debasement is not voluntary but a compulsory reaction to the reality of who we are. It is a right and appropriate thing when a worm grovels in the dust. It is an act of true humility when a king stoops to wash the feet of his subjects. For the king has no law or indebtedness to his subjects that compels him to serve them. But when he voluntarily condescends to be their servant, he is manifesting humility.

This is why Moses was designated as the meekest man on earth in his day (Num. 12:3). He could have retained his high position in Pharaoh's household, but, instead, he chose ill treatment in his identification with the sons of Israel (Heb. 11:24-27). When those sons of Israel grumbled against the Lord and the Lord expressed a determination to destroy them and exalt Moses, the humble servant of God interposed himself as a willing substitute to bear Israel's sin and punishment (Ex. 32:10-32). Moses was under no obligation to perform such sacrificial service but rather chose freely to perform it from a holy love for God and His glory and a gracious regard for the Lord's people.

While Moses served the Lord and His people by delivering to Israel and to the Church in all ages the holy Law of God, our Lord Jesus Christ was by countless magnitudes even more meek and humble in heart than was Moses (Mt. 11:28-30). Jesus did not only offer His life as a redeeming ransom for His people, but He actually did serve as the perfect sacrifice who bore in Himself the full guilt and punishment for our sin. Accordingly, through Jesus Christ grace and truth were realized for us (Jn. 1:17). By God's sovereign, saving grace, the truth about us now is that we are justified in Christ; we are in process of being sanctified; we are being healed by the love of God; we are empowered by God's indwelling Holy Spirit and by our developing new natures that are growing into true Christ-likeness. We are even told in Scripture to regard ourselves as being in a sense even now exalted to heaven in Christ (Col. 3: 1-4).

It is not from our essential weakness and degradation that humility flows. It is rather our abundant spiritual strength and exaltation in Christ that form the soil from which humility grows. We who are in Christ have been enriched, empowered, and exalted. Because of this new reality, we are enabled freely and lovingly to serve others in that meek majesty that is the hallmark of true humility.

That is why there is a voluntary modifier attached to Scripture's references to our service in Christ. We are to be givers of loving service that is rendered cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7). We are to humble ourselves under God's hand and not wait for Him to press us down into serving others (Jas. 4:10; 1 Pet. 5:5,6). We are to stoop willingly to serve others, seeking to build them up and honor them even above ourselves (Phil. 2:1-8). The greater the servant in Christ, the least and lowest place he will seek if it will serve for



God's glory and for the good of his brethren. And the exalted dignity of such humble servants does not diminish, but rather greatly increases by their meek dispositions and lowly service rendered gladly in love for others. May our God open our eyes to see how we have been enriched in our Savior so that we can know that we are able to afford sacrificial cost for others.

Yours hungering for humility,

William Harrell

## **Increasing Sin and Abounding Grace**

Dear Friends,

I am beginning a new series of sermons from the Book of Judges. A familiar and depressing pattern is found in that part of God's Word that increases our discouragement because it is repeated so many times throughout the span of history that Judges covers. The Book of Joshua ended on notes of triumph and high hope for the covenant people who had entered Canaan (Josh. 24:31). However, the pattern of Israel growing unfaithful to the Lord, their enemies gaining ascendancy over them, their crying out to God in repentance, and the Lord's raising up a judge to deliver them, appears early in and runs throughout the Book of Judges. What are we to make of this grim pattern in the lives of God's people? What does our Lord intend for us to see in this part of His Word?

One way we could answer these questions would be by our concluding that the period of the judges was a very early and formative period in Israel's history, and that the covenant nation was simply going through growing pains. Also we could note that in those days there not only was no king in Israel but there also was very little Scripture written then. While these observations are true, they are only part of the picture that I believe our God would have us to see. If we take these points as the whole picture, then we are likely to draw shallow and simplistic conclusions. Such conclusions might be that the generation producing the depressing patterns had little Scripture, no indwelling Holy Spirit, and only few and vague foreshadowings of Christ coming to accomplish redemption. We, who have all of these things, are therefore being taught by Judges to be grateful and use all that God has given to us so that we might not sin as they did.

These observations, while being true, are but the beginning of what we are properly to draw from Judges. Of course we live in a time of much greater spiritual light and more abundant and potent means of grace. For these we should be profoundly grateful and we also should be spurred to make the best use we can of this spiritual provision. Yet, how are we to account for the fact that the pattern of believers' unfaithfulness, their falling into miserable consequences, their crying to God for mercy, and His delivering them from their oppressors continued beyond the judges and into the days of Israel's

kings? How do we account for the deeply dark spiritual climate into which Jesus was born—a climate in which hardly a soul lived in expectation of His coming, while most of His own people rejected Him? How do we account for the pattern of persistent sin in believers' lives in the apostles' days and through nearly 2,000 years of Christian history?

We account for the phenomena we observe in Judges, Kings, the Prophets, the Gospels, the Epistles, and in Church History by our recognizing that the Word of God has been written not only to equip us not to sin, but also and especially to point us to our delivering Advocate when we do sin (1 Jn. 2:1,2). If we treat the whole counsel of God as though it were written merely to inform our minds and command our wills then we have no gospel but rather have fallen into a legalistic perfectionism that will drive us to become either pietistic hypocrites or despairing apostates. The one place such legalism will never drive us is to Christ. The reason is that this kind of legalism drives believers to believe that if they are truly united with Christ and right with God they can and should and must attain moral perfection, or at least excellence, and that for them to expect or tolerate anything less proves that their faith is not real.

It can be a painful perplexity and an embarrassing scandal to us when we allow ourselves honestly to recognize how sinfully ravaged all of God's people we meet in Scripture usually are. There are sterling exceptions such as Joseph and Daniel, but they are far outweighed by lying and carnal patriarchs such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob; and by Jacob's monstrous sons; by David's sinning with Bathsheba; and by the disciples' sluggish faith, proud boasts and petty bickering; not to mention such candid confession as Paul makes in Romans 7 concerning the presence and power of indwelling sin in his life, as well as the heated arguments he had with Barnabas and Peter, at least.

These serious and manifold faults and sinful failures are treated by the Lord in ways that must perplex us even more greatly than does the recurrence of sin in believers' lives. God always loves His people! No matter how far they stray, no matter how often they sin, no matter how bad they become, His steadfast love for them never ceases! God always forgives His sinning children, no matter how many times they may ask for it, and He teaches us to ask at least daily not only for our bread but also for His forgiving our incessant debts (Mt. 6: 9-13).

The shocking, if not scandalous, thing that the Word of God shows us through the pattern of believer's ungrateful sinning and God's gracious forgiveness is that where our sin increases, His grace really does abound all the more. When we apprehend this, the pattern no longer appears depressing to us but rather fills us with thankful relief for the love of God that really is immeasurable, unchangeable, and beyond our understanding. Our security grows in such constant and everlasting love, and far from our sinning all the more in view of God's abounding grace, we grow to be more careful not to sin and more quick to run to our forgiving Father, not away from Him, when we do sin. This is a pattern that fosters in us delight and thankfulness for such amazing grace.

Yours more grateful than ever for His forgiveness,

William Harrell

## Sinful Self-Denial and Righteous Self-Love

Dear Friends,

You may have heard of the acostic, joy, which is said to represent the priority of our loves: Jesus first, others next, yourself last. That priority scheme appears logical and biblical. However, on closer examination we find it to be neither theological nor Scriptural. A repeated hint that something is wrong with that order may be observed in the question and answers of our Larger and Shorter Catechisms. If you read carefully the answers to questions 135, 136 in the Larger Catechism and to questions 68, 69 in the Shorter Catechism they all say the same thing regarding the first priority we have in terms of human love. The duty required in the Sixth Commandment is that we do all we can to preserve the life of ourselves and others (LC# 135; SC #68). The sin forbidden in that Commandment is our taking away the life of ourselves or others (LC# 136; SC #69). Notice how our primary responsibility, not only to refrain from taking life, but positively to love and preserve life, involves our care for ourselves even before we care for others.

Once we acknowledge this priority we are likely to find ourselves arguing against it. We may feel guilty and worldly caring for ourselves before we care for others. Others may tell us that we are being selfish and not Christians when we endeavor to love ourselves. Despite these criticisms we must seek our understanding from the Word of God and not the mistaken notions of men.

What, then, does the Bible tell us regarding this priority? We may begin with what Jesus tells us about the Great Commandment. We are to love the Lord our God first and entirely, but then we find ourselves enabled and directed to love our neighbor as ourselves. This feature of our loving our neighbors cannot mean that we love them before or better than we do ourselves. If Jesus had intended to say that He would simply have directed us to love our neighbor before and above our own selves. However, our Lord tells us to love our neighbor, to care for our neighbor, precisely in a way that we have already learned to do with respect to ourselves.

We also can see the priority of self-love over love for others when we consider the pathology of sin. For example, Cain killed himself by his sinful separation from God before he killed his brother. Also, Jesus tells us to have primary regard for the log in our own eye before we try to have a caring concern for the speck in our brother's eye. These passages of Scripture make clear that we are ourselves in most critical need of the saving love of God and of our own consciousness and cultivation of our liberation from guilt, shame, and self-loathing that result from our sin. Once we have found our own healing in the love of our heavenly Father and in a holy and proper care for our own welfare, then we shall be in a position rightly to love and care for others.

We see this pattern not only in our confessional standards but also in the Word of God. The Canaanite woman came to Jesus being prompted by a sacrificial love for her afflicted daughter. Through her wrestling with Jesus she was led by our Lord ultimately to have a right regard for herself even above the caring concern she had for her daughter. For when she cried, Help me, and sought such help from Him

for herself even if He regarded her as a dog, Jesus commended her for her faith and granted her request for His mercy for her daughter, but first for herself (Mt. 15:21-28). There is also the account of Mary and Martha, where Mary was commended by Jesus for her sitting at His feet and hanging on His every word to the blessing of her soul, while dutious Martha denied herself such self-loving indulgence and received our Lord's correction. Jesus corrected Martha because she was busy with self-sacrificing matters that distracted her from His love and from her own need to seek Him first for the highest and most loving care of her own soul (Lk. 10:38-42).

We can add men to this list of biblical characters who demonstrated righteous self-love. John so indulged himself in the delights of a holy intimacy with our Savior that he became known as the beloved apostle. John must have had a strong self-love so to saturate himself in the love of the Savior even before he concerned himself with his ministry to others. Likewise, we know that Paul was positively fixated upon Christ to the point where he regarded all of the things men regarded as respectable as being rubbish. But what we may not realize is that before he concerned himself with ministering lovingly to others he sought for at least 14 years to know Christ for himself (Gal. 1:15-17: 2:1). And after that course of his becoming theologically self-sufficient he still had a singular goal of his own knowing Christ for himself, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, as he pressed on to lay hold of that for which Christ had captivated him by His saving love (Phil. 3:10-12). But having said these things, is it not true that this same apostle Paul writes that believers should look out not for their own interests but rather for the interest of others (Phil. 2:3,4)? Yes, but he gives that directive only to those who have known for themselves first the encouragement in Christ, the consolation of His love for them, and the fellowship of His Spirit who fosters affection and compassion in them as the fruit of the Spirit whereby they are enabled to love others as we do ourselves (Phil. 2:1,2; Gal. 5:22,23).

The true theological priority of love may ruin our acrostic of joy, but it ushers us into the joy of the Lord, in whose presence is fullness of joy for us and lasting pleasures that we must partake of for ourselves first before we can share them with others (Ps. 16:11). True faith is fixed upon God as He is, the source of saving joy and eternal pleasures. Faith also seeks God as the One who rewards with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6; Eph. 1:3). By faith we can only believe for ourselves and then shine with the light of God's love for us that others may see our sincere and joyful gratitude to Him and love for others and be led to know and glorify Him for themselves. A misguided self-denial can never accomplish so much lasting good.

Yours in faith working itself out in love,

William Harrell

**Finding Excellence in an Evil World**

Dear Friends,

The Word of God encourages us to let our minds dwell on the things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, of good repute, excellent, and praiseworthy (Phil. 4:8). How many of such things should we expect to find in our world? We live in a world that is cursed by God, populated by sinners, and afflicted by devils. Therefore, the excellent, honorable, and lovely things that we could find to ponder might seem to be very sparsely and unevenly sprinkled throughout our world. This apparent rarity of good things and seeming prevalence of evil curses in the world leads too many Christians to complain about our increasingly godless nation and world, while having little to say in terms of their gratitude for the good gifts of our Lord—gifts of His common as well as redemptive grace.

So, we have a world afflicted by devils. Anyone who is a believer and who takes seriously the teaching of God's Word can easily see the bitter fruits of demonic activity. In addition, the Word itself tells us of our need to be vigilant and resistant to the wiles of the devil. However, the Word also tells us that through the cross of Christ, Satan is now a bound and defeated foe whose time to afflict people is short (Col. 2:15). Then, of course, there is the massive and practical light the Word, in the Book of Job, throws on God's sinless use of Satan to bless His children. If we then look for excellent and praiseworthy things beyond Satan's obvious posturing, we shall find many such things to ponder in our lives and in our world.

What are we to make of our own sin and the sin of others in our world? Sin is the plague of plagues that darkens knowledge and ruins relationships. Yet, when we look for, ask God to show us, and expect to find good things in the area of the sin that grips the hearts of the people of this world, we shall find many good things to ponder and praise. For starters, we who are in Christ have ceaseless cause to thank and praise our God for His having broken the dominion of our sin (Rom. 6:1-14). Even our residual sin, that can so easily entangle us, we can by God's grace lay aside (Heb. 12:1); and when we do sin, we have Christ as our effective Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1,2). We have the light of God's Word, the growing inclination of our new natures, the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, and the interceding prayers of the ascended Son of God—all working together to help us attain increasing victory over our sins. If we look honestly at our lives, we discover a growing number of times when we resist temptation and run more quickly with confession to our Father when we do sin. These are good gifts for us to ponder.

How, though, do we find good things amid the raging sins of the multitudes of unconverted souls in our world? If we make our intention to search, we shall find countless instances of our God restraining sinners by His common grace. Also, by His redeeming grace and power, every day our Lord regenerates sinners, turning them from being His enemies and ours into His children and our loving brethren. We can also take comfort in the truth that while unconverted sinners may rage against God and the godly, He who sits in the heavens laughs and scoffs at them (Ps. 2:4). When we arrive at the point of taking sinners no more seriously than does our heavenly Father, we will experience deeper peace that passes understanding and triumph as more than conquerors.

Finally, what can we find good and honorable about this earth that God has cursed? We can begin by our recognizing that God has cursed the earth with thorns, thistles, and diminished fertility (Gen. 3:17-

19). He has not made the earth into an all-consuming inferno. The hurricanes and earthquakes and droughts in our world would be infinitely worse if they were, in fact, instruments of God's exacting justice. Even before the curse, God gave grace and blessing in the promise of the One who would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15), and it is from that grace that God has considerably reduced the ruining capability of all the calamities that do afflict our world. Even the diminished productivity of the earth has a gracious measure. If this were not so, how could the earth's population have reached the billions that this day live in our world? Many, if not most of us on the earth today, live with comforts and tools and nourishment far beyond what kings and nobles have experienced over the course of most of world history. These are good things for us to ponder.

Despite and even encompassing the divine curse and the sins of men and devils, the heavens still manifest the glory of God in lines that run through all the earth (Ps. 19:1-4). If we do not see lavish outpourings of His goodness and glory, it is because we are blind to it and not because there is a stingy supply of praiseworthy things in our world and in our lives. Paul's directive, if we heed it, can serve to open our eyes to a vast treasury of wonderful things in His Word and in the world over which He reigns sovereignly. Then we, like Elisha's servant, will look for and see that all that is with and for us is, at all times and in all situations, greater than what is against us (2 Ki. 6:8-19). My beloved helpmeet came upon a book about three years ago that opened her eyes to this world of wonder. The book is titled, *One Thousand Gifts*, by Ann Voskamp. The author simply testifies to how she began looking for and counting God's blessings in her life. Debi was accordingly encouraged to do so and she testifies that it has changed her life. Long ago she added to her journal of thanks the one-thousandth entry. She is far beyond that now. So may we all be, sooner rather than later.

Gratefully yours,

William Harrell

## **The Truth that Sets Us Free**

Beloved Brethren,

Jesus tells us that if we know the truth we will be set free (Jn. 8:32). These words of our Lord may be familiar to us but do we understand how the truth sets us free and from what it sets us free? Too often we think of truth as being synonymous with an accumulation of facts and we conclude that the more facts we know the better equipped we will be to face life's challenges effectively and free ourselves from frustration and failure. While it is true that our knowing facts about our situations is part of our liberation from ignorance and the blunders we commit when we act in intellectual darkness, this is but a feature of the truth of which Jesus speaks, and it is the least significant feature.

We must begin by asking ourselves the question that Pilate asked when he conducted the trial of Jesus: What is truth? To Pilate, a trained and experienced Roman governor, truth was at best an accurate and full collection of facts and at worst a useless convention in the face of harsh and complex political realities. The irony and tragedy was that Pilate asked his question rhetorically and cynically before the One who was the full and living truth. So what is truth? It is ultimately the person and work of Jesus. Regarding His person, Jesus is very God of God and truly man. He was not the unique God/man from eternity but He became that in the fullness of time in order to accomplish His supreme work of dying for our sins. The work He did was perfect and is now freely available to all who believe in Him. He performed this work because He loved us (Gal. 2:20) and in His doing this work He demonstrated to us the love of God (Rom. 5:8).

The truth that sets us free is the person and work of Christ. From what are we set free? We are liberated from our guilt and fear before God and from the corruption and shame of our own sinful being. How does this work? It is certainly not done in a mechanical or magical way. We experience increasing freedom as we become rooted and grounded in the love of God that is expressed in Christ (Eph. 3:19). It is only as we know the love of God that we are released from the crippling and confining fear we have of God and of others, as well as from our being ashamed of ourselves. Sin plunged us into fear of God (not reverence, but dread) because sin blinds us to the loving and gracious disposition of the Lord. Adam feared God when he heard the Lord approach and he hid from God. Prior to that, Adam was ashamed of himself and sought to hide himself from his own wife when he put on fig leaves. The dread of our Maker and Redeemer and the shame we feel in ourselves are the two primary dark powers from which we are released when we truly know the person and work of Christ.

How does such freedom look as we experience and share it? We cease dreading and start delighting in our God. We realize that we do not have to placate Him as trembling slaves seek to placate harsh and exacting masters. Our God is no harsh master. He is now and forever will be our loving Father. We also cease trying to dodge our God by pleading poor excuses for our stumbles and falls in our pilgrimage (The woman You gave to me!). The truth is that He sees through all of our excuses and still loves us. In sum, we are free to be as we are with our new natures but also with the wretchedness that Paul describes in Romans 7, and free to be so with our God as He truly is, our loving, caring, and helping Father.

We are also free to be ourselves with one another in the body of Christ. We do not need to live lives of secret shame and pretended spirituality. We can afford to be transparent with each other for three amazing reasons: 1) God loves us, 2) our brethren love us, and 3) we love both God and our brethren. As we grow in the knowledge of such truth in love, we rightly feel secure and safe in our casting off our filthy rags of the righteousness of mere outward performance, and putting on the rich and healing clothing of Christ's love, Christ's righteousness, and the joy of our loving and being loved by our brethren. May we all know and grow in such truth.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Preserving the Unity of the Spirit Patiently

Dear Brethren,

The Word of God calls for us to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). We can often construe this as a call for us to be on a vigilant mission to seek out and destroy sin as well as to discover and prosecute sinners. After all, it is clear that we are to hunger for righteousness (Mt. 5:6), and, if we do find sin in ourselves, we are to pluck out our right eye if that is what it takes for us to mortify it (Mt. 18:9). If we find sin in a brother, we are to go to him and confront him and cast him out of the Church if he refuses to respond with repentance (Mt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-7).

It is understandable that we should conclude that our zeal for righteousness is the hallmark of our determination to preserve the peace and purity of the Church. However, there are other places in Scripture that speak of something in addition to our blessed hunger and thirst for righteousness. In the verse immediately preceding the one that calls for us to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, Paul entreats us to be diligent with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love (Eph. 4:2). Later still in his letter, Paul writes of our living the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) and of our building up of the body in love (Eph. 4:16). Added to this should be our understanding of what Paul means when he calls us to preserve the unity of the Spirit. The reference to the Holy Spirit alerts us to the character of our unity and of our maintaining it. In his Galatian letter Paul expounds the fruit of the Spirit in terms of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22, 23). Nowhere in this listing of the facets of that sweet and nourishing fruit of the Spirit do we find such things as harshness, imperiousness, or our being prosecutorial and judgmental in our dealings with others. Even if we do find that others are in sin, we are told to seek lovingly to restore them (Mt. 18:15) and to deal with them in humility and gentleness (Gal. 6:1).

Now it is difficult for us to avoid seeing tension between these calls for us to hunger for righteousness and at the same time to be patient and gentle with those who are unrighteous. The call for kindness and patience especially can be construed as a counsel for us to be soft on sin. What it is really telling us, however, is the way and spirit in which we can be most effective in our dealing with sin. Consider how our sovereign God, who gave us His Word and all that it contains, deals with the sins of people in the Church and in the world. He who can justly require the soul of any sinner at any time and who by His almighty power He can take any sinner out of this life at any time, on most of the days in every sinner's life He does nothing but demonstrate His patience while He gently uses His Word and Spirit to call sinners to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Our Lord calls us to follow His example of kindness, forbearance, and patience. In the parable of the wheat and tares, the servants of the landowner wanted to pull up the tares that were growing among the wheat (Mt. 13:24-30). In response, the landowner tells them to allow both wheat and tares to grow together until the harvest. He gave such instruction out of



consideration for the wheat, saying that any pre-mature dealing with the tares would be detrimental to the wheat.

How can our being zealous for righteousness and our seeking sooner rather than later to challenge sin and root unrepentant sinners out of the Church harm the true believers in the Church? It can do so in a number of ways. Whereas love and patient kindness serve to draw sinners to the Savior where they with relief and rejoicing give up their sin, a harsh and judgmental spirit drives sinners into a denying and defensive posture where they harden themselves in their sin. These different pathologies affect relationships between individuals and they also establish prevailing climates in fellowships. The one produces in a fellowship a climate of loving patience and caring understanding that promotes healing and true spiritual growth among the members of that fellowship. The other produces a climate of prosecutorial zeal that breeds fear and hypocrisy.

While our Lord grieves over the wounds and pains that spiritual zealots cause His tender lambs, He also has a loving care for those zealots who injure themselves even more seriously than they injure others. What does a person do when he convinces himself that he has no significant sin and that his main concern should be with the sins of others? Such a person deceives himself (1 Jn. 1:8) and tries to make God into a liar (1 Jn. 1:10). Such a person also intoxicates himself with gratification over his finding and prosecuting sin in others. He further addicts himself by the repeated successes he has in discovering a wealth of sinning targets, since he easily discovers that all people with whom he has contact or knowledge have indwelling sin. With such a preoccupation with others' sins, he has no time for self-examination and therefore he does not practice edifying confession nor does he experience the Lord's sweet forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9). Nothing makes a person to be more puffed up with insufferable arrogance than does his delusion that he is without sin and can therefore afford to cast many stones at multiple targets.

We should be very thankful that our Lord calls us all to the excellent way of our lovingly covering each other's sins. Such covering is not a concealment in which people can grow complacent in their sins while their sins fester within them and infect others around them. The covering we are to apply is not mendacious but is instead medicinal. We cover them by our leaving them alone with Jesus, who is the very one who tells us all not to accuse unless we are without sin. Then, with our annoying, disheartening, petty, and ineffectual accusations out of the way, our Jesus will deal effectively to release the sinner from condemnation and launch the sinner on a course in which he will sin less and less until, when he enters into the nearer presence of Christ, he sins no more.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Patience

Dear Brethren,

I was recently asked to give a talk at the monthly gathering of our teens. I was assigned the topic: patience. It seems to me that we all might profit from a consideration of that virtue which forms part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22,23). Patience is what might be called a junk virtue. It is one of those things that no one wants to have. Yet, we can begin to appreciate the value of it when we consider that we all would like for everyone else in our lives to have it and practice it with us. Why is patience so despised as a personal possession and highly regarded when we experience the sweet fruits of others practicing it with us?

Part of the answer has to do with such sinful remnants within us as pride. Why, we ask, should we who are confident in our being right, wait to have our will respected and our way won? Related to pride are elements that may not be sinful so much as they are aspects of our weakness and immaturity in the Lord. Such elements as our sense of insecurity and our ignorance of the wisdom, love, and power of our Lord can make us anxious to implement our own will rather than to wait on our Lord to reveal and demonstrated His will. These elements are more consequences of our sin than actual sins in themselves. For instance, ignorance may be sinful when we have had the option to learn but have spurned it. However, it is the case with every single babe in Christ that he comes into the kingdom of God with enormous ignorance of the person and work of the Lord that will take him a lifetime of sanctified edification to outgrow. It is not polite to say but it is true that children tend to be more ignorant and less wise than their elders. Likewise, patience is not a lesson we are taught so much as it is a power we grow to possess, as are all of the facets of the fruit of the Spirit. Patience grows by exercise far more than by academic application.

Why should we be patient? In relation to our God, we have not only His Word that commends those who wait upon Him, but also we have what He tells us in His Word and shows us in His providence about Himself and His works and ways. We do right and we do well to exercise patience because our God's wisdom is infallible—ours is not. He knows all the facts, all of people's thoughts and intentions, and, above all, He knows His plans and purposes for us to give us a bright future and sure hope. We do well to practice patience because our God is almighty—we are not. With our best and most thoughtful intentions we always, fail to some extent in our execution of living our lives and serving others. Above all, we do well to practice patience because our God is love. He loves us with an infinite and unchanging love that will always perfectly guide His wise and powerful administrations. In sum, we should be patient because our Lord is always a more ready and competent worker than we are. We are to wait upon Him to do His perfect work, part of which is His telling us and empowering us to work fruitfully in His perfect timing.

The reasons we should be patient with others is because as we are not as wise, loving, and powerful as our Lord, and neither are they. All people are at all times works in process who grow in that process more readily when we are patient with them rather than imperiously demanding of them. Those who irk us because they act in their ignorance of God today will yet come to know Him perfectly and live for eternity accordingly, either in heaven or hell. We do not have authority or competence to hurry them along.

We need also to learn to have a holy patience with ourselves. We can be grieved and disappointed with our own ignorance, weakness, and lack of growth in the grace, knowledge, and love of the Lord. However, if we try to lash ourselves into quicker growth in grace we shall find that our failures, frustrations, and disappointments increase rather than decrease. This is so because patience is not a vice, it is not the same as sinful indolence or indulgence, it is not a dispensable consolation. Patience is an essential component of our new natures in Christ, and if we fail to understand and live in the knowledge of this, we shall find that we will be hearing the correcting words our Lord spoke to impatient Martha more than the commendable words He spoke to Mary, who sat patiently at His feet, delighting in the pleasure of her hearing and feeding on His every word of wisdom, power, and love.

Yours waiting for the best wine,

William Harrell

## **Divine Indicatives and Imperatives**

My beloved brethren,

I believe that most of us are familiar with the arrangement of the imperatives and indicatives in the Word of God. Imperatives are commands, obligating and ordering us to do something, while indicatives are expressions of fact, indicating to us features of reality. To put it another way, indicatives tell us what is while imperatives tell us what ought to be. Beyond this basic distinction between imperatives and indicatives in the Word, we observe an invariable relationship between them: they are always together in an order where the imperatives are based upon the indicatives rather than the reverse.

The Bible is essentially a book that declares the gospel, the good news of what God has done in Christ for sinners. The imperatives that flow from this good news is that we should trust in our gracious, redeeming God and live by the faith He gives to us in a manner that is consistent with who we are as new creatures in Christ and in relation to our triune God through Christ.

As we consider the character of such imperatives that issue from what God has done for us in and through Christ, we are struck by the gracious, loving, and gentle nature of our Lord's imperatives. They not only follow His great and precious performances and promises, but, when they are issued, they sweetly comply with the gracious character of the good news that is declared in the indicatives of the Word.

Although we sinners—even those of us who are redeemed in Christ—find it impossible personally, perfectly, and perpetually to obey God's Ten Commandments, it is not because those Commandments are harsh, unreasonable, or undesirable. The Law of God that tells us what to do directs us only to do that which is good and right and loving. It is due to the residual weakness of our flesh, not to the growing strength of our new natures in Christ, that we find it impossible perfectly to do the very blessed and holy things our God commands us to do (Rom. 7:12,15,22-25; 8:3,4). Still, the imperative is the last, never the first, mood that our Lord employs in His Word. This is so because He is at work for us and in us long before He calls upon us to will and do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:12,13). Jesus made the dead Lazarus to live before He called upon him to come out of his tomb! God's being for us as our loving Father, with us through the person and work of His Son, and in us by His Holy Spirit is what inclines and empowers us to welcome His commands as precious and loving directions rather than to dread them as unwanted and imposing rules.

As we observe the order and character of God's imperatives and indicatives we are led to consider our own modes of communication with each other. Here we enter into a searching and humbling exercise. We have seen how our infinite, holy, all-wise, almighty, and sovereign God, who rightfully has all authority and who with perfect and effectual competence wields that authority, issues His words of command sparingly and secondarily. It is too frequently otherwise with us. Think of how often we use imperatives in our speech. We freely tell people that they should or need to do all sorts of things, from purchases they should make, clothes they should wear, films they should see, hours they should work, what they should do with their time, money, and possessions. On what basis do we speak like this? Surely not from our possessing divine authority and infallible wisdom! Whenever we use the word should in our speech, we are actually telling our hearers that they have an obligation to do as we say. If God is so sparing with His imperatives and reserves them to be in a secondary place in His speaking to us, why do we so freely resort to imperatives as first modes of expression when we speak with others?

The answer to this question can be seen in such Scripture passages as when Jesus spoke of the log in our eye and the speck in our brother's, and when He corrected Martha, whom He truly loved, for her imperious attitude toward her sister, Mary (Matt. 7: 3ff; Lk. 10: 38ff). We can drift into being keenly aware of what we regard as others' needs while deluding ourselves into thinking that our only need is to accomplish the correction of others. We seek to effect such change without due authority and without the necessary competence and compassion to do so. We simply express our orders and proceed to argue with others and even cajole them into following our orders. This is what our Lord refers to as one person lording it over another, and He strongly declared that with His people it would not be like that. Such vain and vociferous ordering of others is all that the worldly can do because between unregenerate sinners there can be no true and lasting love, only attempts at domination.

With us it should not and need not be so. As we grow in true and vital knowledge of how our God gives lovingly to us and works potently and prevailingly with us to will and do His perfect commands, we will find ourselves giving to others encouragements before exhortations and showing our compassion for and commitment to those with whom we lovingly determine to yoke ourselves to make their burden lighter. Then we shall use more indicatives, telling our brethren of our love for them and our desire to help and empower them. And when we do express imperatives, we shall do so in the plural, we should do, rather than the singular, you should do. By our lovingly yoking ourselves with others, we will actually see more imperatives heeded than when we just issue naked orders for others to obey.

Your brother and servant,

William Harrell