**SAVED BY GRACE**

**WHERE IS GRACE?**

 Do you feel saved? Be honest! You attend all the services, participate in congregational activities, and try desperately to be a good example to others. Howbeit, you fear that heaven is unattainable.

 You feel something is lacking. The problem can be found in our dismal understanding of grace. Seldom is it preached. When it is presented, the meaning is often misinterpreted or not properly explained.

 Ask a member how many hellfire sermons he has heard. Now ask that same man to define grace. I know what it is like to sit in a pew and hear the minister ridicule the congregation for their lack of faith. Jesus said of the Pharisees, *“But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in” (Matt. 23:13).*

 As a young Christian, the road to heaven was nowhere to be found. In my own mind I concluded that I was not good enough, well enough, or worthy enough for a place alongside the elect.Hence, why even try to be faithful?

 Then there was that selected group of sinners who failed to attend Sunday evening worship, or Wednesday night Bible study. Let alone the congregational misfit that was so involved in worldly activities that he or she was rarely seen at assembly worship. Reflecting to my younger years, I wonder if anyone was bound for heaven.

 I am not relinquishing the fact that attendance and activity are not factors of obedience. I believe that Hebrews 10:25 and Romans 6:17 are clear foundations established by the early apostles. However, the magnetic pull of the local congregation can be somewhat lacking.

 In one stanza of the song, *Sweet, Sweet, Spirit*, it reads, “*There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place, And I know that it’s the Spirit of the Lord; There are sweet expressions on each face, And I know they feel the presence of the Lord.”* Be honest, *“Is that what you see and feel when you attend worship?”*

 I can’t explain why we sometimes treat the church like a social club. We open our doors to the elite. *“I don’t want that kind around here,”* expresses an all too common response from our brethren. Our mission is clarified by Christ when He said, “*For the Son of man is come to* ***seek******and*** *to* ***save*** *that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10).*

As a minister, I want that gang member to come and sit with my family in the pew, alongside of the unwed mother, and the abusive husband. I want them to hear the gospel and experience the forgiving power of God’s grace. I want them to know what they must do to be saved. These people can be transformed (Rom. 12:1, 2).

 So, I am committed to understanding God’s grace. I tread cautiously because I do not want to limit it. As creatures of habit, we often define, measure, and manipulate our understanding of things to satisfy polluted perceptions. The result is the elimination of God’s grace all together.

 Are we guilty of erasing grace out of the hearts of members? Our worship often falls short. We have spoken so much on not exhibiting emotions that we are emotionless. We are trying to convince the gainsayer that acappella singing is what God desires. Howbeit, in many congregations the assembly sounds unenthusiastic, disheartening, and somewhat discouraging.

 I need to shout it from the mountain tops that God has saved me by His grace. I need to sing it in the assembly that God loves me. Brethren, we have been set free by the truth (Jn. 8:32). We should be the happiest people on the planet. So why aren’t we? Because many are convinced that they are lost! Many have concluded that God’s grace passed them by. It is time to better define and understand the meaning of GRACE!

 Before we begin, I want to be didactic in my approach and not pedantic (making a big deal out of a few facts). It is not my intent to ruffle feathers or complicate the subject by suggesting that my philosophy of thought is the only right approach. I searched for the meaning of grace from ancient sources, commentaries, word studies, and the Bible. Like so many, I sought to understand God’s grace. I wanted to feel it, experience it, and share it with others.

**A BRIEF HISTORY**

 I know what you are thinking, “*Here comes the boring part*!” In searching for the meaning of grace, the intellectual philosophies of the past help us to see the various directions that other men forged.

 Catholicism uses the term ***actual grace*** when instructing followers. It is defined, “*Temporary supernatural intervention by God to enlighten the mind or strengthen the will to perform supernatural actions that lead to heaven. Actual grace is therefore a transient divine assistance to enable man to obtain, retain, or grow in supernatural grace and the life of God.” (New Advent Catholic Encyclopdia).*

In their teachings, grace is extended further by the word ***gratuitous****.* The Catholic Dictionary defines it as “*the free gift conferred on particular persons for the salvation of others. Technically called gratia gratis data (grace freely given), it is independent of the personal moral life or behavior of its possessor. To this class belong such gifts of grace as charismata (prophecy, gift of miracles, gift of tongues), the priestly power of consecration and absolution, and the hierarchial power of jurisdiction.” (The Catholic Dictionary)*

Catholicism teaches that the beginning of faith involves an act of free will, that the initiative comes from God, but requires free collaboration on the part of man: *"The fatherly action of God is first on his own initiative, and then follows man's free acting through his collaboration. Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion.”* *(The Catholic Encyclopedia, Faith))*

In the Fifth Century, Pelagius, ascetic moralists, spoke out against the catholic view of grace and placed emphasis on the *free will* of men. Pelagius believed that people had the ability to seek God, and they themselves, apart from any actions from God or the Holy Spirit, salvation could be gained by their own efforts.

 A thousand years later, Martin Luther enters the picture. He firmly believed that mankind was saved by grace alone. He wrote, *“The center of which all the petals clustered was affirmation of the forgiveness of sins through the utterly unmerited grace of God made possible by the cross of Christ, which reconciled wrath and mercy.” (Solia Gratia, Martin Luther)*

 Luther saw the book of James as a ***straw epistle.*** He believed that James 2:14 contradicted Romans 3:28, Galatians 2:16, and Romans 9:23. He was blinded to the fact that Paul spoke of the works of the Old Law, and James focused on the works of the faithful.

 During the 16th Century, another theologian arose attempting to define grace. John Calvin, a young prodigy from Switzerland, developed his philosophies from the writings of Augustine. He believed that God’s grace was irresistible and limited. In other words, God predestined some to be lost, and others to be saved. Even further, Calvin taught that grace was given to the elect unconditionally.

 Move forward two hundred years, and John Wesley enters the debate. He writes on the **prevenient** grace of God. This is a grace that is given to the individual before he or she ever accepts Christ. Alvin Petty states, “*It (prevenient grace) is showered by God upon all people whether they are aware of it or not. It can be called “prepatory” or “assisting” grace. This aspect of grace leads people to repentance of sin and realization of the need of God. When one begins to manifest a sense of life as a gift, it is a sign of God’s* ***prepatory grace at work****.”*

 If I were to continue looking at the various definitions of grace throughout the ages, I would speak of Immanuel Kant, Sorren Kieregaard, Karl Barth, and a host of others. Men who viewed grace differently, comparably, and sometimes extremely radically.

 So how can these men help us when defining grace in our own lives? Their endless search for knowledge hindered them from advancing beyond the physical. Truth is not often found in conjectures, formulas, or theories. Luther, instead of debating the doctrine presented by James, should have sought a better grasp of the harmony of the word.

 Often, we who are members of the church of Christ are labeled *Pelagians; w*hereas, this labeling is not only incorrect, but insulting. I do not believe that one can earn his or her salvation. Grace is a gift!

 When I look at the works of past theologians, it becomes obvious that even the most prolific fall short in defining it. They are polluted with the philosophies of their times. Grace must have a meaning, a definition that is universally accepted. God uses that word throughout the Bible. Without grace, the scheme of redemption is eliminated. So how can there be so many diverse beliefs concerning grace? It just doesn’t make sense!

 As we move forward, maybe one needs to begin by outlining the dimensions of grace. Is it measurable? Let’s talk about the umbrella of grace.

 **CHRIST & GRACE**

Note the five times the word grace is used in the gospels:

 **Luke 2:40**, “*And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and*

 *the grace of God was upon him.”*

 **John 1:14**, *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his*

 *glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.”*

 **John 1:16**, “*And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace.”*

 **John 1:17**, “*For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus*

 *Christ.”*

 In every case i*t is used to speak about Christ.* Not once is the word orated from the lips of Jesus. The life of Christ was centered on His message, the word! Luke writes, “*And all bare him witness, and wondered at the* ***gracious words*** *which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph's son?” (*Luke 4:22*).*

 Without the word there is no grace. Jesus said, *“It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (*John 6:63*).* It is imperative to understand that one cannot separate faith, grace, works, salvation, or any other doctrinal necessity from the written word. Faith comes through obeying the word (Rom. 10:17), and grace is granted only through abiding in the teachings of Christ.

**THE UMBRELLA OF GRACE**

 The first time the word grace is used in the Bible is in Genesis chapter six.

 *And it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the Lord said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found* ***grace*** *in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:1-8).*

 The Hebrew word used here is CHEN. It is defined by Strong’s as *favor* or *grace*. When looking at the situation during the days of Noah, the world was enveloped in sin. God had decided that the wickedness of man was so deplorable that termination was the only course of action.

 *“But Noah found grace…”* Why? Was he perfect? No! He was a sinner. He was a loving father, a good husband, and a caring friend. At the same time, he was a sinner. After being saved from the flood, the first thing Noah did was plant a vineyard, process some wine, and got drunk. Along comes his son Ham who unveils his father’s nakedness to his brothers (Gen. 9:20-25). The wickedness of man did not die in the flood, it continued through the family of Noah.

 This brings me to my first point about understanding grace. It was not given to Noah because he deserved it or earned it. He received it because of **God’s love and mercy** for His creation. What separated Noah from the rest of the world at the time was faith and obedience. He was an obedient sinner depending on a compassionate God. *“By faith* ***Noah****, being warned of God of things not seen as yet,* ***moved*** *with fear,* ***prepared*** *an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith” (Heb. 11:7).*

When the family of Noah disperses to populate the earth there is a blockade in Genesis chapter eleven. *“Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there” (Gen. 11:1, 2).* This is an interesting story because of the attitudes of the people. This was the first generation of the family of Noah. If any people should have understood the meaning of grace, it was them! Noah found it, and these people lost it. God destroys the great tower, creates a language barrier among them, and once again disperses them. God’s grace never dissipates. Out of the scattering crowd arises the father of the faithful, Abraham in Genesis chapter twelve.

 The first time the word grace is used in the life of Christ is found in the gospel of Luke. The angel of Gabriel appears to a young virgin named Mary in the little town of Nazareth (Luke 1:26, 27). The next verse reads, *“And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly* ***favoured****, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women” (Lk. 1:28).*

The Greek word is CHARIS. Much like the Hebrew word used in Genesis six, Mary receives God’s *grace* or *favor*. She is to bear the most important man in the history of the world. She has been chosen to bring forth the Messiah. Why is she chosen? Some have concluded that once the infant was placed within her, Mary would no longer sin. She would remain sinless the rest of her life. This belief has no credence. Paul proclaims, “*For* ***all******have******sinned****, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).*

 *We* note that Mary was chosen because of her **ancestral lineage**. Her father was Heli, who was a direct descendent of David. Yet let us not forget that Joseph, the Lord’s stepfather, was also in that lineage.

 Mary was chosen because of her **faithfulness** to God. Her faith is clearly revealed in her speech to Elizabeth in Luke 1:46-55. This young Jewish girl was a true believer in Jehovah. Mary and Elizabeth exemplified the true character of godliness.

 When looking at that long list presented in Matthew chapter one and Luke chapter three; one sees sinners. From Adam to Joseph, we find great men underserving of salvation. For example, Abraham, a man who was an obedient servant, yet willing to compromise his wife to save his own neck (Gen. 20:2). Then there was David. Being chosen king over Israel, he was a man after God’s own heart (1 Sam. 13:14). Nevertheless, David plotted and executed a plan to kill his best friend simply to steal his wife (2 Sam. 11:5-27).

 Let us not forget Moses. This chosen vessel who led the Israelites out of bondage was a murderer (Exod. 2:14). At the end of his journey the great prophet disobeyed God and was refused entrance into the land of promise (Num. 20:8-12). This did not stop the writer of Hebrews from including Moses in his historic pictorial of the faithful (Heb. 11:23-29).

 Defining grace focuses on two words: **truth** and **righteousness**. The track that leads to God’s grace is truth! Jesus said, *“And ye shall know the* ***truth****, and the* ***truth*** *shall make you free” (Jn. 8:32).* The psalmist declared, *“Lead me in thy* ***truth****, and teach me: for thou art the God of my salvation; on thee do I wait all the day” (Psa. 5:5).*

How much truth must I have in order to feel secure or saved? Take for example a young man who has just been baptized into Christ. On his way home, he is killed in a tragic car crash. Before his conversion, he spent much of his life as an active member of a particular denomination. Upon his demise, he still held some of those false beliefs. Can one believe something false and be saved?

 Let’s get real! During the personal ministry of Christ, His disciples held doctrines that were contrary to the truth. Concerning the healing of the blind man in John nine, the question was asked, *“Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?” (Jn. 9:2).* It sounds like to me that that they believed in *inherited sin.*

Turn again to John chapter four where Jesus speaks to the Samaritan woman at the well. John writes, *“Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the* ***Samaritan****s” (Jn. 4:9).*

Many of the Jews that walked along side of Christ despised the Samaritans and hated the Gentiles. In Matthew fifteen, when the Canaanite woman came and pleaded for her daughter, the apostles were agitated with her, *“But he answered her not a word. And his disciples came and besought him, saying, Send her away; for she crieth after us” (Matt. 15:23).*

Next, we find in the book of Acts a man by the name of Apollos. Luke writes,*“And a certain Jew named Apollos, born at Alexandria, an eloquent man, and mighty in the scriptures, came to Ephesus. This man was instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord, knowing only the baptism of John. And he began to speak boldly in the synagogue: whom when Aquila and Priscilla had heard, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly” (Acts 18:24-26).*

Apollos was a false teacher! What if he would have died before being properly instructed? Would God’s grace overlook his error? Would he had been saved? I’m not going to answer for God. Howbeit, it would be ignorant of me to think that Apollos was the only minister during this period still teaching the baptism of John.

 Further, let’s look at the biases of the early apostles. How often have we preached that prejudice is a dangerous sin with eternal consequences? Yet several, if not all of the apostles, were prejudice. Peter, who preached the gospel to the household of Cornelius, unveiled his prejudice to the Gentiles in Galatia by refusing to take a common meal with them (Gal. 2:11).

 These twelve men were Jews. They were dedicated to temple worship, and Jewish superiority. They despised the Samaritans (Jn. 4:9) and pleaded with Christ to turn away the woman from Canaan (Matt. 15:22-28).

 Turn to the Old Testament and note the actions of Jonah as he runs away from his responsibility because he was told by God to go and preach to the people of Nineveh. It took a turbulent ocean and a giant fish to bring him to his senses. However, even then he preaches the shortest sermon, converts the masses, and sits on top of a hillside waiting for the Ninevites to fall back into sin. Jonah is the iconic representation of prejudice in the Old Testament.

 I am not writing this manuscript to point fingers and tell you who was saved and who wasn’t. I realize that there are things we must believe to be saved: (1) Jesus divinity and humanity, (2) the plan of salvation, and (3) the doctrines of the early church. I am simply suggesting, hoping, praying, that God’s umbrella of grace reaches further than our own defined dimensions.

 Why did God choose men like Jonah and the early apostles? These men were ignorant, unlearned, prejudice and egocentric at certain times. They were often scared, tormented, and reckless in their endeavors. The Lord offers Peter the keys to the kingdom, and shortly thereafter calls him Satan (Matt. 16:18, 23).

 Look at these selected vessels. They were mere men privileged by the grace of God. We often talk about the inner circle: Peter, James, and John. Were they really the inner circle, or were they the three that needed the most attention? We assume without any factual evidence. We are not theorists but fact finders and fact presenters.

 The Bible distinguishes those who were on milk in contrast to those on meat (1 Cor. 3:2; Heb. 5:12). Christian growth is in direct correlation to moving from false beliefs, presumptions, and lack of knowledge to true principles. “*And* ***such******were******some******of******you****: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name* ***of*** *the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit* ***of*** *our God” (1 Cor. 6:11).*

 There are many members that were not raised in the church. We were not privileged in that way. That does not mean that our parents were irreligious or heretics. They were faithful denominationalist believing in the ecumenical philosophies passed down from their ancestors. I was converted, along with my family, at the age of eleven. Later, I went off to college, left the church, and became a charismatic.

 After college, I entered the military, left the charismatic movement, and enjoyed the pleasures of sin. Several weeks after I exited the army, I decided to go to preaching school. I still held many false beliefs. It took men like Billy Nicks and M. H. Tucker to guide me. Through study, prayer, and patience, these brethren became my Aquila and Priscilla, and I played the part of Apollos.

 It was truth that opened my heart and dissolved my false beliefs. Those simple guiding principles, precepts, and doctrines are the illuminating paths that led me to God’s grace. I was exhilarated by truth, dedicated to it, faithful to the proposition that truth did indeed set me free.

 Let’s note the second word, ***righteousness***. It was the psalmist who wrote, *“Offer the sacrifices of* ***righteousness****, and put your trust in the Lord” (Psa. 4:5).* According to the scriptures we are to be led by it (Psa. 5:8, 15:2), rewarded because of it (Psa. 18:20), and judged according to it (Psa. 7:8, 9:8).

 When Isaiah looked at the righteousness of men he concluded, “*But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as* ***filthy******rags****; and we all do fade as a leaf; and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away” (Isa. 64:6).* It was Solomon who declared, *“For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not*” (Eccl. 7:20). Paul further stated, “*As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10).*

 Being righteous is not equivalent to my own remedial definition. My best try will always end in failure. It was Paul who said, *“For that which I* ***do*** *I allow not: for what I* ***would****, that* ***do*** *I not; but what I hate, that* ***do*** *I” (Rom. 7:15).*

When I think about the first time the word righteousness is used in the Bible, it intrigues me*. “After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir. And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:1-6).*

 *“…and he counted it to him for righteousness.”* In this vision, Abraham questions God. He tells Him that he is a man without an heir. He does not fully comprehend the magnificence of God’s power or His Divine Providence. Abraham is a man with doubts, fears, and a questionable future. Yet, HE BELIEVES GOD! There it is! Abraham, a man with insecurities, trusts in God’s grace.

 To fully accept God’s grace, we must believe in His love, His promises, and His word. We allow our own insecurities, doubts, and sins to create a wall. We convince ourselves that God can’t love us. We are too evil, too cantankerous, and undeserving. We fail at our jobs, marriages, and other commitments. We reach a state where our feelings are obscure. Our hearts become insensitive, and we learn to dissimulate our emotions. Why? Because we believe that righteousness is unachievable.

 Brethren, we must understand that righteousness is associated with God’s grace. Paul said, *“Even the* ***righteousness*** *of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference” (Rom. 3:22).* People, I am failure! I am a sinner! Howbeit, two thousand years ago, Christ was sent to a world of failures, to a world of sinners, to a world without hope. Paul wrote to the brethren at Philippi, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Phil 4:13). That tells me that Paul could do nothing without Him.

**FINDING GRACE**

In most instances in the Old Testament, grace is said to be “found” (Gen. 6:8, 19:9, 33:10, 39:4, 47:29, 50:4). It implies a result to a directed search or something discovered. God discovered Noah within a corrupted society.

 The prophet Moses said to God, “*See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found* ***grace*** *in my sight” (Exodus 33:12).*

 This favor that God showers upon Noah and Moses is beyond mortal reach. God offers it, delivers it, and saves His creation by it. This Divine gift did not arise from the confines of man’s wantonness. Throughout his existence, man has failed to see the writing on the wall. Fleshly man is not capable, nor is he able to comprehend the full measure of God’s grace.

 It is the spiritual man that can appreciate the true meaning of grace. Paul wrote, “*But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are* ***spiritual****ly discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14).*

When an atheist looks up at the heavens, he views only what is visible. When a Christian gazes at the heavens, he sees a beautiful artistic piece signed by the Creator. Is there life on another planet? Yes! Somewhere, beyond this earth, there is a place called heaven. A place where God dwells, the angels serve, and the gates are never closed.

 When we look at the Bible, there are many people rejecting God’s grace. Jesus speaks of the refusal of Lot’s wife to obey God (Gen. 19; Lk. 17:32). How about the rich young ruler? He turned and walked away from the grace offered to him (Matthew 19:16-32). Let’s not forget Judas. He heard the words, felt the power of God, and was able to perform miracles (Matt. 10:1). His betrayal of Jesus was a complete rejection of grace.

 Jesus said, *“Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30). What Jesus was offering was grace. The Lord’s saving grace was without restrictions. To receive it, one only had to make a directional change. Sadly, Satan’s influence was more appealing than a Savior’s embrace.

**THE UNDENIABLE AFFECT OF GRACE**

Let’s take a step further in our search to understand grace. Though grace becomes the pinnacle theme of God’s power to save mankind, why do I feel so lost? The Pauline doctrine of marriage in Ephesians chapter five gives the reader a true understanding of the importance of this institution. In one place, Paul writes, *“So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church” (Eph. 5:28, 29).*

When I read this passage, I respond, “*I don’t cherish my body*!” I tend to stay away from mirrors at my age. Whoever called the senior years in life the “*golden years*,” must have been nuts. I get up several times a night, ache when I go to bed, and feel the pains of arthritis and neuropathy constantly. You may be asking, “*What does any of this have to do with grace?”*

 Here’s the answer, **God’s grace is not hindered by our inconsistencies**! He doesn’t love us less today than yesterday. His love for us is unwavering. It is our love for Him that changes. Jesus, for example, said, “***If*** *ye* ***love******me****, keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15).* Sadly, His disciples were not always obedient. They broke many of His commandments. They were excuse makers, and jealous of each other.

 Paul says that the Lord *nourishes* and *cherishes* the church. The word ***nourish*** (*ektrephei)* is used one other time by Paul. The apostle states that fathers are to bring their children up in the “*nurture (ektrephei) and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4).*

The second word, ***cherish*** *(thalpei),* is also found in Paul’s first letter to the brethren at Thessalonica*, “But we were gentle among you, even as a nurse cherisheth her children” (1 Thess. 2:7).* The word focuses on a profound love for someone or something.

I find it interesting that Paul uses words associated with parenting to emphasize the love Christ has for the church. This is demonstrated further when the disciples came to Jesus with a question, *“At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them,and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1-4).*

For years I used this passage to place emphasis on the relational dynamics of Christ and His followers. We apply the attributed nature of children in our obedience to God. Stop! Think! We are the children of God. Nothing can take that kinship away. Once I see myself as that little child sitting on the knee of Christ. When I see God as my Father caressing my forehead when I’m sick, holding my hand in the crowd, and wiping my tears away; it is easier to grasp His love for me.

 My physical father exhibited all types of emotions in my upbringing. Sometimes he was mad at my failures. At other times he commended by stamina, and my ability to endure afflictions. He defended me, protected me, and most importantly, he loved me!

 Could I have had a better father than my dad? YES! God is my Father! What my physical father did for me in life, God magnifies that a million times more. How often has He come to my rescue? The psalmist exclaimed, “*He* ***delivered*** *me from my strong enemy, and from them which hated me: for they were too strong for me” (Psa. 18:17).* We have all been forsaken by someone (2 Tim. 4:10, 11), but not by God (Heb. 13:5).

 The feeling of loneliness and despair will often distort reality. We sometimes move toward the belief that God gets tired of us and leaves us stranded on some dark highway trying to hitch a ride. God says, “***I******will******never******leave*** *thee, nor forsake thee*” (Heb. 13:5). That word ***never*** is impressive. In normal conversation we use it deceitfully. God’s usage of the word is definitive.

Brethren, I beseech you to open the gates of heaven and make it attainable. God’s grace is the key! In the song, ***Why Did My Savior Come To Earth****?* One stanza reads, “*Why did my Savior come to earth. And to the humble go? Why did He choose a lowly birth? Because He loved me so!*

**THE UNTOUCHABLE GRACE**

As we move further in our understanding of grace, one can conclude that it is **untouchable** by human standards. I don’t understand why Jesus loved me. I don’t understand why He sacrificed Himself to save me from my sins. I’m just ecstatic that He did.

 Human nature teaches us to respond to stimuli whether negative or positive. If you show me affection, I will likewise respond. If you harm my family, I will seek vengeance.

 Turn the pages of the New Testament, and you find a different approach. Jesus said, “*Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt* ***love*** *thy neighbour, and hate thine* ***enemy****. But I say unto you,* ***Love******your*** *enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of* ***your*** *Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust” (5:43-45).*

Jesus said that the greatest act of love was the ability to sacrifice one’s own life for a friend (Jn. 15:13). However, the Lord takes it a step further when He died for all of mankind (Rom. 5:6). Does this mean that Christ died for Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Charles Darwin? Was it possible that Jeffrey Dahmer, a man who murdered young men, and devoured their remains, could become a follower of Christ and be saved by God’s grace? YES! YES! YES! That is exactly what it means! Don’t try to understand God’s grace with human reasoning. *“For* ***my*** *thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your* ***ways******my******ways****, saith the Lord” (Isa. 55:8).*

 God wants you to achieve. He wants heaven to be your final destination. Peter wrote, *“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should* ***perish****, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).*

Here is another question to ponder, “*Did God agape Satan?”* We should be aware that God did not create sin. Satan originated sin by his rebellion against God (Isa. 14:12). It is evident that Satan was created for good, loved by God, and received the same gracious treatment manifested to the heavenly hosts. Yet grace could not hold Satan. For whatever reason, he broke away from that grace, and became an enemy of the righteous. God will always love His creation, but He despises sin (Psa. 5:4, Psa. 11:6, Lev. 20:23, Prov. 6:16-19).

 Could Satan and his angels repent, and receive God’s grace? No! God knows his nature. He is pure evil. Everything that was once good has dissipated into obscurity. The bible does say that even Satan will bow his knees to Christ: *“That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth;And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10, 11).* Sadly, Satan and his followers will drift into eternity without hope.

 What about those souls who are lost in Hades? There are no unbelievers in Hades. Those who have ended up in Tartarus are suffering. Salvation is offered to the living, and not the dead. The bridge of hope is broken once one dies. The righteous land in the bosom of Abraham, whereas the wicked are eternally damned (Luke 16:19-31).

 How is grace associated with the lost? Because those lost souls in Hades were once earthly beings. They had families, friends, businesses, and associations. They at one-time breath the same air, gazed at the same oceans, and endured many of the same conflicts that we experience as living human beings. Many of them were religious. Some never missed a service, showed benevolence to others, an even died for their convictions. Yet, they were condemned to a nightmarish hell!

 Why? For the door of grace is only opened by **faith** and **obedience**. The umbrella of grace can only protect those who abide under it. Remember that grace is defined by words like “*unmerited*,” “*favor*,” and “*mercy*.” If I have faith it will be manifested in my works and actions (James 2:14-26). I don’t do good works to be saved; I do good works because I am saved. If I were to do more works than any other person on the planet, I still must conclude, *“We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our* ***duty*** *to do” (Lk. 17:10).*

 Think about the question, “*What is the measurement of God’s grace?*” I reply, “*It bulges no further than His word, and extents much broader than our thoughts*!” Paul proclaimed, *“That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth (****platos****), and length (****mekos****), and depth (****bathos****), and height (****hupsos****);And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God” (Eph. 3:17-19).*

As God’s creation, we live in a world guided by mathematics. Everything is measurable, whether it is our height, age, or years of service. We guess, reason, and calculate anything and everything. Paul’s narrative focuses on a four-dimensional measurement of Agape. He emphasizes that this love *passeth knowledge*.

 What does that mean? Simply stated, “*His love cannot be defined in human terms*!” Most people love conditionally. We have standards and measurements that are easily definable. Many good church members fall short because they never advance any further than friendship (*phileo)* love.

 I often define agape love as *the ability to love the unlovable*. John writes, “*We love him, because he* ***first******loved*** *us” (1 Jn. 4:19).* That short verse says it all. When I was a nasty, careless, terrible person, Christ loved me. The love for the wayward son in Luke 15:11-32 did not change from the mire to the party. The father’s love never wavered.

 Grace is all about opening the human heart to the love of God. It is right there in front of us. All we must do is reach out and grab it. I am not worthy, nor do I deserve it; but it is offered.

 ***Grace & Forgiveness***

 You cannot separate grace from forgiveness! We depend on God’s grace because we need to secure that forgiveness to make it to heaven. One of the major problems in the narrative of grace is the acceptance of forgiveness. Could it be that we do not believe we are forgiven because it is so difficult for us to forgive?

 In the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus taught men how to pray, “*After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you:But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matt. 6:9-15).*

The Lord’s commentary on forgiveness is in direct correlation to the concept of grace. The way we forgive is how God forgives us! I cannot expect any mercy, grace, or reconciliation if I limit my ability to forgive others.

 I truly believe that many members are unhappy because they simply will not forgive. How often have members left nearby congregations because of a disagreement with a brother or sister? We are so eager to grow that we take in these members without encouraging reconciliation. Shame on them! Shame on us!

 Solomon said, *“****A******friend*** *loveth* ***a****t* ***a****ll times,* ***a****nd* ***a*** *brother is born for* ***a****dversity” (Prov. 17:17).* Many good Christians long for this type of relationship with their brethren. The New Testament personifies the church as a family, a bride, and a body (Eph. 5:32; Rev. 22:17; Eph. 1:23). The emphasis placed on the three descriptions points to the intimacy of the relationship.

 Think about the battered brother or sister that has been betrayed, humiliated, and scarred by others? Will and Donna Ferrell are two such people. I served under Will in California. I can think of no better man to serve as an elder in the Lord’s church. Donna was the perfect elder’s wife. She was sound, supportive, and concerned for the welfare of others. Yet one unsound elder, and liberal members, wounded them severely. At the present, they worship in a great congregation in Tennessee, but their scars are still visible.

 What’s the point? To this day many of those who hurt them have not repented of their deeds. Their vicious and hateful attitudes still resonate. They are proud of the fact that they drove an elder from his position. They justify their actions and will proclaim till this day that Will and Donna were the villains. Will and Donna are forgiving people. They would forgive without hesitation if those who offended them would ask! Will it come one day? Only God knows! Sadly, this scenario is common place within the Lord’s church.

 So many brethren are hurt and dismayed. Gossip, backbiting, and lying have destroyed many faithful believers. It was James who stated, *“And* ***the******tongue*** *is a fire, a world of iniquity: so is* ***the******tongue*** *among our members, that it defileth* ***the*** *whole body, and setteth on fire* ***the*** *course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell” (James 3:6).*

 Through all these many trials and tribulations, God showers His followers with grace. People like Will and Donna will prevail. There is a special place in heaven for them. The friendship we hold should be universal with all members of the Lord’s kingdom. Why isn’t it? I didn’t become a Christian to be part of a fraternity; I responded to the Lord’s invitation to be engrafted into a family.

 Let’s move further, forgiving others is a necessity. What about forgiving yourself? John writes, “*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7).* The hardest part of the process of forgiveness is the acceptance of that forgiveness. It leads me to a deserted place concluding that I cannot forgive myself! Unlike the prodigal son, I continue to wallow in mire.

 Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “*For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21).* When I don’t accept God’s forgiveness, and I refuse to forgive myself; we nullify the sacrifice of Christ in our own hearts. That’s exactly what Satan wants. In that Garden of Eden, the devil plotted the demise of God’s pinnacle creation. He knew the power of grace, and he hated God for it.

 The magnitude of the serpent’s hatred is viewed in the book of Job. Here was a man who was enjoying life to the fullest. He was a good husband, father, and friend. The Bible defines Job as a man who *“was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil” (Job 1:1).*

In conversation with Satan, God asks*, “Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?”* Then note Satan’s response, *“Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face” (Job 1:9-11).*

Those who have read the story are aware of the outcome. Job’s children are killed, his livestock destroyed, and his wife turns bitter against him. He is struck down with illnesses and finds himself in a garbage heap confused and alone. His best friends accuse him of sinning against God, but Job stands firm behind his convictions.

 Where was God’s grace during this tumultuous period in the life of Job? Why did God allow Satan to inflict His servant with so much pain? Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar are unanimously in agreement that God was the punisher. When you turn the pages to the end of the story, God consoles Job, and rewards him for his faithfulness.

 Whenever I read the book of Job, I am simply glad I’m not Job. Would God allow Satan to destroy my family, take away my livelihood, and turn my wife against me? Does this kind of interaction still take place in the realm of the invisible? I am not going to tread where angels fear to tread. I live by Paul’s proclamation, “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a* ***way*** *to* ***escape****, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).*

 In my own life, I have often felt that God’s grace was meant for everyone but me! He can shower that grace upon the neighbor down the street, or the criminal behind prison bars; but I am exempt. This perverted view of grace is well believed by a great number of Christians. We long to be saved but feel so unsaved!

 Paul declared, *“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****” (1 Tim. 1:15).* When do I stop being a sinner? Baptism washed my sins away (Acts 22:17), put me into Christ (Gal. 3:27), and saved me (Mark 16:15, 16); however, I continued to sin! Every time I transgress I hammer another nail into the body of Christ. I am always aware of the possibility of total apostasy (Heb. 6:6).

 Therefore, it is important to embrace the grace of God. I must be willing to forgive others and myself. We are an imperfect people in the presence of an awesome, forgiving, loving Father.

 I must bridge beyond my human frailties. I live under a glass as a servant of Christ. Not only must I walk the narrow path, but my family also is under scrutiny. What if one of my sons professes he is a homosexual? What if my daughter has children out of wedlock?

 Satan is vicious. He is going to do his best to destroy your spirit. He aims high. He wants the eldership to dissolve, the minister to fail, and the deacons to resign their positions. The old serpent never misses a service. He’ll distract you when the Lord’s Supper is served, when the prayer is prayed, and when God’s word is being preached. He is a real estate agent. The more people he can drive away from the assembly, the easier it will be to sell the building and close the doors.

 His main goal in the hearts of men is to destroy any residue of grace. He does not want you to believe in it, accept it, or share it with others. He knows better than anyone how powerful it is. He rejected God. Hence, he pursued a destiny that ends with fire and brimstone.

 As a minister, how do I get the assembly to open their hearts to the grace of God? There are always going to be those members within the kingdom that are distant. You try so desperately to shower them with love. You pray for them, with them, and do your best to understand them. Nevertheless, they will not let you into their lives. Many ministers yearn to be treated like a member and not like a hired servant. How often has it been said, *“We hired you; we can fire you!”*

Let’s turn to the leaders of the local congregation. God never meant for congregations to be led by a *men’s business meeting*. It reduces the local church to a political system seeking the approval of her constituents. God meant for qualified men to shepherd the flock (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1).

 A sound minister and qualified leaders serve as conduits of grace to the congregation. They have manifested that grace in their own lives. Paul tells young Timothy, “*Let no man despise thy youth; but be thou* ***an******example*** *of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12).*

John states about Christ, “*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as* ***of*** *the only begotten* ***of*** *the Father,)* ***full******of******grace*** *and truth” (Jn. 1:14).* One might proclaim*, “You’re not Christ!”* No! I am not. Yet I am a disciple of Christ. I am an evangelist who has been given the mission to bring men and women to Christ. I am a living epistle planting the seed of grace in the hearts of men.

**GRACE AND TRANSFORMATION**

Arminianism teaches a type of synergy between man and God. *Synergy is the creation of a whole that is greater than the simple sum of its parts.* Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609 A.D.) believed that salvation had to do with the human will cooperating with God’s divine grace. It is the rejection of predestination.

 Once again labeling is not my intention. I simply suggest that to find grace, I must find the bridge that connects my spirit with His Spirit. *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not* ***conformed*** *to this world: but be ye* ***transformed*** *by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. For I say, through the* ***grace*** *given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith” (Rom. 12:1-3).*

 Paul makes it clear that transformation is in opposition to conformity. It is a metamorphosis that takes place in the heart of a sinner. A dirty and vile creature emerges from the cocoon of grace into the image of Christ.

This transformation has to do with **direction, submission, and acceptance**. Christ said, *“If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his* ***cross****, and follow me*” (Matt. 16:24). Later Paul would speak about the mind of Christ, and James would write concerning one’s submissiveness to God (Phil. 2:5-11, James 4:7).

 Don’t forget, we are seeking to define and understand grace. Yet this can never happen if I refuse to transform. The Bible speaks of two mysteries: the mystery of godliness and the mystery of sin (1 Tim. 3:16, 2 Thess. 2:7).

 For the clear majority of people, they will never find the narrow way (Matt. 7:13, 14). What about those who do? It comes down to acceptance. I can find the road, travel down the road, and not accept the reality of it. Satan is a deceiver. He makes us stop and question the word. The Old paths become the dim paths.

***Growing Grace***

 ***“Grace*** *and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord… But grow in* ***grace****, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen” (2 Pet. 1:2, 3:18).*

 The grace of God is seen as a seedling that is planted. As we continue to study and apply God’s word, that seed begins to grow.

***Five Healing Exercises***

 I don’t know if you have a clear understanding of grace after reading this manuscript. Most of what I have written is an individual endeavor to satisfy my own search. However, I would like to help you embrace God’s grace, and feel secure in your own salvation.

 First, **be active in your faith by doing good deeds for others.** In one of my mission trips to India, I met a young rich Hindu. He was always happy. So one day I asked him why he smiled all the time. He said that his life was fulfilling. I asked, *“Why?”*  He said, “*At least once a week I do some good deed for a stranger*!” I thought his reply would focus on his wealth, his family, or his religion. He was happy because he made other people happy. Brethren, an active faith makes one happy!

 Second, **be committed to your faith by establishing relationships.** I’ve heard gospel preachers exclaim that their entire duty is to simply preach the gospel from the pulpit. Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Your duty is to exemplify Christ in everything you do.

 Each Sunday, groups of people meet in buildings throughout the world. They sing the songs, pray the prayers, and participate in the other acts of worship. They question why they are not growing. From Sunday morning to Sunday evening, half the congregation stays home. Then Wednesday rolls around with only a handful in attendance.

 The preacher bangs the pulpit centering on Hebrews 10:25, “*Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”* No one is listening! They’ve heard it preached a hundred times. Discouraged, discontented, and perplexed, the minister hangs his head in shame.

 We have used the excuse for years that people don’t attend because they are lazy! Maybe the preacher is dry and boring; maybe the singing is pathetic; and the prayers are mumbled. Maybe! However, we have not even considered the real reason attendance is down and enthusiasm is diminished: *the family image has been damaged by apathy*.

 Fifty years ago, Christian families shared meals together. Not at the building, but in each other’s homes. There was such closeness among the members that it was illuminating to others who visited. Families didn’t have money to spend, but they could always make it to services to enjoy the company of others.

 Even before my family became members, Brother Clint Gobin spent time with my family at the airbase in Grand Forks. He scrolled through the Jules Miller filmstrips. He shared cookies and coffee with my parents. The Grife family across the street were faithful members of the local congregation. They became our best friends. In the winter of 1966, my whole family were baptized into Christ.

 When attending services, we felt so exhilarated. Brother Clint was not an eloquent speaker. The singing was average, and the Bible classes were fair. Nevertheless, being around those good people was more enjoyable than anything I could imagine. God’s grace was bouncing off the walls and into the hearts of the people in the pew.

 Are you hearing me? God’s grace is not being felt by many because they don’t feel like part of the family. We need to rebuild that image and get involved in the lives of others.

 Next, **be dedicated to God by being more submissive**. It is nine o’clock in the morning. A huge spiritual event is about to take place. You take a moment to consider going, but you don’t. By the time you step out the door, you look up the hill and view three crosses. You have watched many executions on that hill. Yet this is like no other. The crowds can be heard from a distance. Darkness covers the earth, and your mind questions the unnatural happenings. It was a day that would release grace into the world of sinners. Three days later, one empty tomb and a resurrected savior would turn the world upside down.

 I am submissive to God because I believe those events actually happened. If that death was faked, and the body of Christ was found buried in the desert; the Lord’s Day would have no meaning to me. I come together with the saints to enjoy the presence of Christ (Matt. 18:20).

 Next time you’re at service close your eyes. Imagine that an angel is sitting to the right and left of you. Close your eyes again and see the roof disappear and God and Christ gazing down at the congregation. Brethren, you don’t have to imagine, IT IS REAL! When you are able to open your hearts and accept the reality of His presence, it will change you! (2 Kings 6:17).

 I am submissive to God because I want to please Him. My father was a hero. He served in the Korean War and won a silver and bronze star. He retired from the Airforce in 1967. His last unit was the 804th Communications Squadron stationed out of Grand Forks, North Dakota. On my dad’s 45th birthday, I had a ball cap made with the numbers and letterings of this unit. I will never forget his smile, his excitement, his pleasure in this small gesture. It made me feel good to put joy in his heart.

 Should we not want to do the same for our Father in heaven? Sadly, we end up hurting God. We disappoint Him, abuse His generosity, and show no gratitude for the sacrifice of His Son.

 So often people place religious slogans on their vehicles, wear shirts praising Jesus, and identify Him on their ball caps. This does not make them religious. Being holy isn’t a slogan that is worn, but a way of life.

 This paper set out to define grace, an enigmatic five letter word that must be experienced in order to be appreciated. I can write about it, express it, and even categorize it; yet fail to understand it.

 When one becomes submissive to the will of God, grace takes on a different perspective. It is no longer hidden in the dark corners of the universe. It takes on shape and meaning. It becomes amazing! Faith finds a resting place in my heart through the word (Rom. 10:17). I do not need proof that God exists; I know He exists.

 I plead with you, do those things that please God and see if you don’t feel better about yourself. You want to be happy; make God happy! You want to feel His grace; submit to His Will.

 Also, **be motivated by positive thinking!** Isn’t it terrible how cruel some of our brethren can be? They will lie, exaggerate, and gossip in a grand attempt to glorify themselves. This could easily be taken care of if good brethren would refuse to hear such men and mark them that do such.

 Why do we allow such messengers of Satan to damage our relationship with Christ and the church? Being positive is the key to floating in the clouds instead of sinking in the oceans. When I was a young preacher, I spoke in a lectureship in Virginia. I presented the lesson in a nervous fashion, and I am sure there were those who felt I did a pitiful job. However, in the audience was Andrew Connelly. He was a tall man with a masculine voice, and a heart of gold. While I preached, I could hear him shout, “*Amen*!” When I was finished, he complimented me and made me feel special.

 I love positive people who lighten up the world around them. Paul was a spiritual cheerleader to the young preachers of his day. Timothy and Titus were recipients of Paul’s kindness. He was never boastful, proud, or arrogant in his demeanor and treatment of others.

 Being positive will bring out the best in others. At the Freed Hardeman Lectureships in the early 80’s a debate between Rubel Shelly and Allen Hires took place. For those who were there, they remember students clapping their hands when Rubel spoke. They can recall the key points of the discussion. The diversity was evident.

 Howbeit, Dowell Flatt spoke that same day on the unity of the church. He talked about standing on three mountains in his lifetime. He ended his sermon by stating, “*Let’s gather on top of those mountains and look out at the many nations and say, those are our enemies, let us be friends*!”

 After the sermon was preached, several brethren gathered around Dowell stating their appreciation for his presentation. I waited my turn, and simply whispered in his ear, “*That was the greatest sermon I’ve ever heard preached*!”

 I only had the pleasure of returning to Freed Hardeman Lectures a few more times, but Dowell never forgot me. I spoke from my heart to his heart. In the arena of great men, Dowell expressed compassion. He invoked the thought that in a world of negativity, let’s be positive.

 Further, **be energized by the actions of other Christians**. How do you feel when you watch a good movie, or read a great story? To be sensitive is not a bad thing. Concerning Christ, it is written, *“But when he saw the multitudes, he was* ***moved*** *with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (Matt. 9:36).*

Throughout my ministry, I have seen men and women do great things for Jesus. For a decade I traveled to India and felt exhilarated by the dedication exhibited by our brothers and sisters in that great country.

 I had the honor of knowing C.E. Manning. He was a Virginia preacher that endured the hardship of losing two young sons, one by drowning, and the other by electrocution. Through all his hardships he never lost his zeal for preaching, and his dedication for the cause of Christ.

 The most influential man in my ministry was Perry Cotham. He badgered me to write a tract on the charismatic movement. He insisted that I take over his work in India. He taught me how to smile through adversity, appreciate the ministry, and love the brotherhood.

 I can also speak of Jimmy Canup. He preached in and around Galax, Virginia for years. His son-in-law, Mark Bass, is the minister for the Alkire Road church of Christ, in Grove City, Ohio. Jimmy is a country preacher. He has a southern draw, a gentlemen’s disposition, and a heart that is as big as the Blue Ridge Mountains.

 I do not want to forget John Waddey. He was a man who shamed the brotherhood by committing adultery during the time when he was *Director* over the *East Tennessee School of Preaching and Missions*. This does not negate the fact that he made the Bible come alive for his students. Solomon strangled his spiritual commitment by opening his heart to strange women who led him into idolatry (1 Kings 11:1). Howbeit, his poetic writings were inspired by God.

 When I think of John, I don’t reflect on the newspaper article that pointed to his adultery. I don’t contemplate on the gossip, whisperings, and reflections that sought to diminish his past work. I think about the memory of John sitting by my bedside in the hospital while I suffered through a virus that nearly took my life. He encouraged me, prayed for me, and walked away worried about my condition.

 None of these names are mentioned to erect some type of monument to the righteous or the wicked. They were simply men who were influential. They believed in me, loved me, and somewhat molded me into the man I am today.

 To further energize one’s spiritual life, turn the pages of the Bible*. “Tell me the story of Jesus, Write on my heart every word; Tell me the story most precious, Sweetest that ever was heard.”* This first stanza of the song written my Fanny Crosby is inspiring. The wonderful stories told in the gospels are breathtaking. They are there to encourage, educate, and excite us.

 Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the damsel pouring ointment on the feet of Jesus; these are stories about sinners. People haunted by the remembrances of their past sins. They wallowed in the mire and bore the scars of damaged lives. Yet without hesitation Jesus touched them with His grace.

 In John eight, a woman is brought to Jesus who undeniably committed the sin of adultery. In fact, the Bible says she was caught in that very act (Jn. 8:4). The law demanded that she be stoned: “*And the man that committeth adultery with another man's wife, even he that committeth adultery with his neighbour's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death” (Lev. 20:10).* Where was the man? You find the woman being dragged before Jesus, but where is the man? Is he standing in the crowd? Was this all a setup to trap Jesus? We can only conjecture what Jesus wrote in the sand that turned the crowd away. Yet His response resonated in the heart of that adulterous woman, *“When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? hath no man condemned thee? She said, No man, Lord. And Jesus said unto her, Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (John 8:10, 11).*

This woman came in contact with the grace of God through Jesus. His statement, “*Go, and sin no more!*” was a life changing motivational challenge. Hopefully she stopped being a fornicator. Nevertheless, it did not stop her from being a sinner. She would, like the rest of us, fall short her entire life.

***Five Damaging Realities***

 ***First, we are all victims of victims!*** I was not the originator of this statement. I learned the dynamics of this philosophy at graduate school. Though we do not inherit sin, we are molded by the different relationships in our upbringing. Even the way we define things is in direct correlation to the influences of others.

 My first God image was my father. In my mind he was infallible, powerful, and indestructible. Through his instructions, I learned about the Bible and God. It was in his power to teach me to be obstinate, agnostic, or devoted to truth.

 Face it! Most people are what they are because of the negative or positive influences of their parents. The failure in understanding grace may be due to the fact that it was not practiced or taught in many homes. This was not the case in my upbringing. Yet we are all aware of the increase in crimes because of bad parenting.

 During our early years in school, the social network becomes the schematics to be followed. It is deceivably more important to have friends than to have a religion. In youth we don’t think of grace, mercy, or hope. High school students see love on a more hormonal plain than inspirational.

 Attending church camp, bible study, or even services is more plutonic. Many young people have to be entertained. I have often seen parents visit the congregation and ask, *“What are you offering for my child?”*

 In short, many have victimized their children. They have convinced them that worship is paying homage to them, not God! Children’s church, events, camps, and conventions can have a negative impact on the minds and hearts of the young. I love Christian youth camp! There is nothing wrong with young people having fun. Howbeit, let us also teach them the importance of serving their home congregations.

 ***Second, a defeatist attitude incinerates the concept of grace.*** The person who is a defeatist builds a barrier between him and God. A wall that is not easily broken.

 If I believe that God’s grace will not save me, I live without hope. I would declare like Job, “*Or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants which never saw light*” (Job 3:16). So I must believe in His mercy and grace without reservations.

 ***Third, envy and jealousy hinder our proper vision.*** Why do we allow ourselves to become envious or jealous? We associate wealth and prosperity with grace. Just because a person has material wealth does not mean that it is a blessing. How often do you hear of movie stars committing suicide? How about the billionaire that admits to fraud and lands in prison?

 God’s grace is not about material wealth and possessions. Jesus proclaimed that he had no permanent dwelling (Matt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58). Often, we find that Christians are some of the most impoverished people in the world.

 I think about the poor of India. Village life is primitive. One room huts with dirt floors, and a well that supplies the entire community. Within the village, there will be several paths that lead to the river where water is drawn, babies are bathed, and clothes are washed. Every year I would come back and thank Jesus for running water.

 Are we so much better off because of our possessions? We have it all: cars, television, elaborate bathrooms, and a host of gadgets. If grace is directly correlated with wealth, we are the nation of grace! Sadly, IT IS NOT!

 If anything, our prosperity and advancements have driven us further away from grace. During the Great Depression, people were more spiritually enlightened and happier than any other time in our history as Americans. Gus Nichols, Marshall Keeble, and a host of others drew strength from this dark period.

 Lectureships, tent meetings, and gospel meetings were greatly attended. Children were taught to sit by their parents for long periods. The minister was not confined to a thirty-minute sermon. People came to hear the gospel preached. It wasn’t difficult to find grace. You saw it in the people’s faces.

 I remember looking at a picture of my great-great-grandfather. He was a member of the church of Christ in Alabama during the 1800’s. In that photo one can see the lines on his sun beaten face. The shabby log cabin saturates the background, and his wife and children surround him. He didn’t have much. He wasn’t famous, but he was a Christian.

 When he attended services, the transportation was a wagon drawn by a couple of horses. They carried the family meal in a basket. After the day had ended, the clan jumped back into the wagon and headed home. Since the congregation was made up of poor farmers, the circuit preacher would be paid with meats and vegetables.

 Imagine in those days when the oil lamps burned at night. There were no radios or televisions. The bible was often read to the children before bedtime. Grandma and Grandpa read separately before they would slumber. Grace touched their hearts. It paraded their dreams. It gave them hope, encouragement, and a reason to survive in the most difficult of times.

 Grace can be seen, felt, and understood. Our possessions, wealth, and wants cloud our vision and blind us from the brightness of God’s mercy. God does not love me less or more than He loved my great-great-grandfather. His grace is not limited by time or space.

 ***Fourth, allowing the past to predict the future.*** It has been said that we are a creature of habit. Abraham Lincoln wrote, “*Human nature will not change. In any future great national trial, compared with the men of this, we shall have as weak and as strong, as silly and as wise, as bad and as good. Let us therefore study the incidents in this as philosophy to learn wisdom from and none of them as wrongs to be avenged."*

When Paul wrote to the brethren at Corinth, “*And* ***such******were******some******of******you****” (1 Cor. 6:11),* he referenced their spiritual change in direction. This did not happen without God’s invisible hand. Old Abe was right that human nature is surprisingly predictable. We will continue to see wars, famines, and disease. Man will not cease inflicting pain on the innocent. The world will continue to spin in sin. However, the few will still cling to the grace offered and delivered by Christ.

 ***Fifth, many find it difficult to believe in the promises of God.*** Have you ever asked God to forgive you of a sin that has already been forgiven? Do we not believe that God has forgiven us the first time we asked?

 The face of Stephen had to be embedded in the memory of Paul. He stood there and smiled as the stones pounded the young disciple’s body (Acts 7:58). Seeing such a scene did not hinder Saul but motivated the Pharisee to inflict more damage on the church. After his conversion, he was questioned by many (Acts 9:26). One of the theological discussions in the First Century was centered on the question of God’s grace being extended to men like Saul!

 Paul never attempted to justify his actions. Before Agrippa he states, “*I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities. Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests” (Acts 26:9-12).*

 I believe that Paul never forgot Stephen. He was a compassionate man. He writes, *“Are they Hebrews? so am I. Are they Israelites? so am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? so am I. Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:22-28).*

 The most amazing thing about Paul was his ability to move forward. *“Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 3:13, 14).

 Not only did he bury the past, he accepted God’s grace. He thought of himself as the chief of sinner and a wretched man, but forgiven (1 Tim. 1:15, Rom. 7:24). It is imperative that we accept what God has offered.

**FAITH**

*“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1).* God’s definition of faith is final. It gives no leeway to interpretation or conjecture. Yet it almost seems dichotomous. You have the idea of substance in contrast to the invisible.

 It goes further to talk about the evidence, not from any theoretical perception. Faith itself is guided by logic, reason, and proof. The faithful entourage of believers in Hebrews eleven unveils men who met the invisible and were guided by a God whom revealed Himself to His creation.

 When rebuking Aaron and Miriam for their insubordination, God said, “*And he said, Hear now my words: If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house”* *(Num. 12:6, 7)*.

 The word faithful is important to grasp. I want to be in that category, that entourage, that fraternity. Moses’ faith led him to the door of grace. So, then, it is imperative to trace the route of faith.

 ***First*** ***Step***

The first step to becoming faithful is to ***believe*.** You might be thinking, “*I believe*!” Yet, I want to question your belief. Let me asks you, “*Are you faithful in attendance*?” “*Are you faithful in studying*?” If you seriously believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, His word is law, and obedience is necessary for salvation; then why are you not faithful? If hell is real, and the clear majority is lost, why aren’t you more faithful? It is not my intent to intimidate you, but to motivate you!

 Brethren, if I truly believe the Bible, then I will act upon it. The Bereans were noble because they were faithful in their attendance, study habits, and willingness to follow Christ (Acts 17:11, 12).

 Belief is not just something, it is everything! The devils believe (James 2:19), but their belief in Satan was greater! Men act upon their beliefs and willingly die for what they perceive to be true. Howbeit, our faith is not based about perception, but on the actuality of facts. Though our evidence is not seen, it is nevertheless evidence. Jesus was real! He lived, bled, died, and was resurrected. Over a thousand witnesses verified the risen Christ.

 ***The Second Step***

Believing in something motivates men to ***action***. To act upon the teachings of Christ is the second step to becoming faithful. Throughout my years as a Christian, I have heard many quote the Bible, and not follow it! I’ve heard people brag how many times they have read the Bible and failed to obey it.

 Young Timothy was told to study the Bible (2 Tim. 2:15), and at the same time to follow the teachings (1 Tim. 4:12). The world would be a much better place if the teachings of Christ were engrained in the hearts of men.

 For years I have heard some brethren say that politics and religion should not mix. Yet, I think it would be great to see our government bow their heads in servitude to Jesus. Can you imagine a government that never makes a decision without opening the Bible first, or insists that the courts never rule without the word of God being confronted?

 ***The Third Step***

 Once I act upon my beliefs, I must be ***motivationally progressive***. A weak faith is a faith that fades. Paul wrote to the brethren at Thessalonica, “*We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith* ***grow****eth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth” (2 Thess. 1:3).*

True faith is all about growing in the Lord. We do not begin our journey being strong, but infants needing nourishment. As time progresses, our faith grows stronger through exerted effort. That’s right! Faith is all about hard work and sacrifice.

 ***The Fourth Step***

Once I begin this race of faith, I must ***finish it***! *“Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the* ***prize****? So run, that ye may obtain” (1 Cor. 9:24).* I don’t like to quit at anything I do. When running the race of faith, it becomes obvious that I’m not the best runner. I’m neither the quickest nor even great at it, but that doesn’t mean I can’t finish. Our entrance into heaven is not dependent on how well I run against the next guy.

 When I was a young minister, I often compared myself with other preachers. I wanted to stand in the pulpits they stood in or preach the meetings that they held. As I grew older, I learned that preaching the gospel is not a competitive business, but a soul saving crusade.

 We are not trying to sell ourselves to others. We are in the business of planting the seed of Christ in the hearts of men! Sadly, we often create our own diocese. Fallible men are placed in hierarchical positions and praised as if they were divine. I believe that we should give honor to them that are due (Rom. 13:7). Yet with God there is no respect of persons (Rom. 2:11, Eph. 6:9, Col. 3:5).

 Finishing the race is the goal of every Christian. It is the most difficult challenge any person on earth will face. For the clear majority, they will not even begin the challenge. I have seen many good brethren fall on the wayside, and never cross the finish line. At the same time, I have seen many of my brothers and sisters endure the afflictions and cross over into eternity with smiles on their faces.

 Finishing the race is not easy. Many of my preaching brethren have verged off into secular careers because of mistreatment. A great number of talented men are terminated from their positions because of power struggles within the church. I have learned never to try out for a position where the past minister had been mistreated. No matter how corrupt a congregation may be, they will always find someone to stand in the pulpit.

 Yet, I plead with my fellow evangelists, stay strong and committed. We need good men in the pulpit preaching the gospel. Sure! You are going to be called names, lied about, and often humiliated, but keep your eyes on the prize.

 Don’t think about those difficult times when the money was tight, the treatment was cruel, and the tension was unbearable. Focus on that young man you instructed and baptized into Christ. Think about that elderly lady who thanked you for being with her when she said her final goodbye to her husband. Count your blessings, and you will see they far outweigh the bad.

 ***Faithful Examples to Follow***

 The bible does not lead a man blindly. It is not a book that has you fill in the blanks. The word of God defines the term, and then offers you many examples of it.

 Let’s begin in the **home**. The foundation of our society rests within the boundaries of the home. To function properly, the home needs a Christian father and mother. God speaks concerning Abraham, *“For* ***I******know*** *him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him” (Gen. 18:19).*

When God chose a family to raise His Son, Mary and Joseph were selected. Why? A carpenter and a young virgin represent the best of parenting. They were dedicated (Luke 2:21-24, 4), and concerned parents (Luke 2:48-52).

 Next, we see the strength of Joshua. His testament to fatherhood is proven by his remark to the new crop of Israelites, “*Now therefore fear the Lord, and* ***serve*** *him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers* ***serve****d on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and* ***serve*** *ye the Lord. And if it seem evil unto you to* ***serve*** *the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will* ***serve****; whether the gods which your fathers* ***serve****d that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will* ***serve*** *the Lord*” (Josh. 24:14, 15).

 One should not forget the parenting skills of the mother and grandmother of Timothy. Paul wrote, *“When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother* ***Eunice****; and I am persuaded that in thee also*” (2 Tim. 1:5).

 What did all these parents have in common? THEY PUT GOD FIRST! Everyone of these individuals had a personal relationship with the Heavenly Father. They knew Him, loved Him, and served Him.

 That proclamation that “*faith comes by hearing the word of God*,” implies action. Once those words land in the heart, one either rejects or applies the message. One is either a “doer,” or a “don’t!”

 It is imperative that children be raised by two parents who share Jesus with them. Moses told the parents of his day, “*Specially the day that thou stoodest before the Lord thy God in Horeb, when the Lord said unto me, Gather me the people together, and I will make them hear my words, that they may learn to fear me all the days that they shall live upon the earth, and that they may* ***teach*** *their children” (Deut. 4:10).*

Second, let’s talk about being faithful in the **house** of God. We are not talking about a house made with lumber and nails. The house we speak of is the church. It is the pillar and ground of truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

 Are you faithful in your attendance? You are probably thinking, “*Here we go again*!” You have heard it a thousand times about the importance of attending. Maybe you reason that if you make it for the Lord’s Supper, you have served. Think! If you spent the same amount of time around your wife, would you still have a marriage?

 Are you faithful in serving? True worship is all about serving. I do not gather with the saints to fulfill some obligation. I come to worship to fellowship and serve Jesus. We always speak of the separation between our church family and our physical family. On the hierarchical scale, my church family towers far above my physical family.

 It is most pleasant when our physical families are Christians, but this is not always the case. One must remember that physical families exists only in this sphere of existence. In the next world, my church family will be with me for eternity.

 When the saints attend worship, participation becomes the key. You are not at services to be a bench warmer. When the songs are sung do your lips move? When the prayers are prayed is your head bowed? When the lesson is delivered are you attentive?

 What about your attitude in worship? Some folks act as if they are forced to attend. Though their bodies are present, their hearts are somewhere else. In the book of Revelation, the reverence toward God by the holy angels should be mirrored by all believers: “*And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and* ***worship****ped God” (Rev. 7:11).*

 Next, do you exhibit a life of faith around your peers? Whether it be at the local restaurant or the workplace, others need to see a Christian. Concerning the last qualification of an elder, Paul writes, “*Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:7).*

 **WORKS**

 How are works defined in the Bible. The ***International Bible Encyclopedia states***, "To work" in the Old Testament is usually the translation of `asah, or of pa`al (of the works both of God and of man), and "work" (noun) is most frequently the translation of ma`aseh, or mela'khah; in the New Testament of energeo, ergazomai (and compound), with ergon (noun). The word "works" (erga) is a favorite designation in John for the wonderful works of Jesus (5:36; 10:38; 15:24, etc.; "miracles" to us, "works" to Him).

 The Bible speaks often about the works of God (Judges 2:7-10, Psa. 9:1, Psa. 26:7, Psa. 28:5). Not only did he labor bringing forth this universe, but He exerted effort in directing the paths of His greatest creation. Hence to say that we worship a God that continually works on our behalf, and never tires.

 In the religious world today, the doctrine of works is most often misunderstood. In the New Testament, two works are described. First, Paul speaks about the **works of the Law**. The apostle writes, “*And if by grace, then is it no more of* ***works****: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of* ***works****, then it is no more grace: otherwise work is no more work*” (Rom. 11:6). This is further discussed in his letter to the brethren at Galatia, He states, *“Knowing that a man is not justified by the* ***works*** *of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the* ***works*** *of the law: for by the* ***works*** *of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Gal. 2:16).* In both cases, Paul was writing to the Hebrew brethren making them see that returning to the Old Law could not save them.

 The second works spoken of in the New Testament are those works **commanded by our Lord**. If works have nothing to do with our salvation, then why did Christ demand that His subjects do them? It was the Lord who said, “*Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are* ***few****” (Matt. 9:37).* He further exclaimed in the parable of the Kingdom, “*For the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which went out early in the morning to hire* ***labour****ers into his vineyard” (Matt. 20:1).* He also proclaimed, “*For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his* ***works****” (Matt. 16:27).*

James states that one cannot have faith without works. He writes, *“Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble. But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead? Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God. Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only. Likewise also was not Rahab the harlot justified by works, when she had received the messengers, and had sent them out another way? For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also” (James 2:17-26).*

In the great faith chapter of the Bible, Hebrews eleven, faith leads to action. Noah, Abraham, and Moses accomplished great things through action. They all did something. Whether it was leaving a country, building an ark, or leading the people to the promised land; works was a major part in proving their faith.

 Sometimes people draw the conclusion that if works has something to do with salvation then where is the love. When I was a child, I obeyed my father out of the fear of being punished. That fear did not negate the love I had for him. The act of doing things for my father was motivated by reward. Not so much a dollar in the piggy bank, but the affection shown for accomplishing the tasks I was assigned.

 I want to do the same for my Heavenly Father. I want to broaden the borders of His Kingdom. I want to put a smile on His face. Jesus needs laborers NOT benchwarmer. Our complacency has cost the souls of a great number of people. The mission of Christ was to “*seek and save the lost*.” You cannot accomplish that without works.

 When I look at the many parables of Jesus, several center on works. Whether it be the hesitant son sent to work in the vineyard (Matt. 21:28-31), or the Good Samaritan going out of his way to help a stranger (Luke 10:33); activity was at the center of the message. That is what works are all about, being actively involved in broadening the borders of the Kingdom.

 The true test of Christianity is noted by our actions. Saying you love someone and proving that you love someone are two different things. I often use the basket demonstrations in marriage counseling. That is where you ask the married couple to count the eggs in their baskets. This is a pretentious basket that is filled up with demonstrations of love throughout the courtship and marriage. It is an accumulation of all those things that are admired by both. What happens so often is that during the marriage many of these special acts are removed and not replaced. Soon the basket is empty, and a marriage is in jeopardy.

 Associate this philosophy with Christianity. Our relationship with Christ is centered on filling up our love basket. We fell in love with Jesus. We do things to put a smile on His face. It is important for us to keep Him at the center of our hearts. Yet, what happens when there is inactivity? What happens when the basket is emptied? Our love fails, and so does our relationship with Jesus.

 Let’s ask the question, “What works are profitable for the kingdom?” Let’s be plain, the Lord’s church is suffering! Many congregations are merely surviving, others are about ready to sell the church building. I want to proclaim that an active, working church will grow! The mentality of many congregations when looking for a minister is aimed at their pulpit and teaching abilities.

 My advice is to seek a man, not by his age, or what diplomas he can nail to the wall, but his ability to get up, get out, and work the community. To do this, YOU HAVE TO LOVE PEOPLE! Sometimes a minister desires to make a name for himself. Brethren, we need to make a name for JESUS! Gospel meetings are great, and lectureships are even better; but focusing on the needs of the local congregation is pivotal.

 When Perry Cotham asked me to take over his work in India, I was astonished. There were so many others that could preach and teach classes better. I was a simple local preacher that enjoyed ministering to the needs of the local saints. Yet, that was the reason he wanted me to take his place. I was motivated by saving souls. My adrenalin gets pumped when I see a soul respond to the gospel. Whether it be the prodigal son returning to the Lord, or the alien sinner being immersed in the waters of baptism; conversion is addictive.

 The works that are profitable for the kingdom are **simplistic**. Doing little things yield huge results. That eighty-year-old grandma that bakes pies for the needy impacts a community. The young women that sends out get-well cards to people should be highly praised. If you want to see church growth, start internally.

 Second, the works that are profitable are **studious**. This word means to be *diligent* or *earnest in intent*. Paul would inform the brethren at Galatia and Thessalonica not to be weary in well doing (Gal. 6:9, 2 Thess. 3:13).

 The dedicated Christian is actively engaged in doing service to God every day. It is not a religion of the “one-time act!” We are servants (*doulos,* servant, or slave) to Christ (Gal. 1:10). The gospel is the shackles that chains us to the Messiah. We live, breath, and exist because of the glorious word that dwells within our hearts.

 Third, the works that are profitable are **substantial**. The word substantial means that something is important or essential. Carrying the gospel to the world is at the center of New Testament theology. Every soul has the right to hear the gospel, and we must do our part to spread the good news to those around us. If one where to asks members of the church how often they conversate with others about Jesus, what would be their answers? How many of our friends will be seen across the gulf proclaiming, “*You never mentioned Him to me!”?*

 When I was a young boy, we would visit our grandmother in Carbon Hill, Alabama. She had a cousin who was a member of the church. Every time she came to visit grandma, other family members would scatter. Why? They knew she was going to come and talk about the Lord’s church. Some called her fanatical, but she had such a fondness for the Bible and the church that she told everyone she met.

 I don’t know why, but it is hard to see that zeal in the church presently. It could be that many fear rejections, or is it that they are not fully committed to the cause of Christ? In the past, when I interviewed for a position at a local congregation, I was asked what was my greatest talent? I replied, “*The act of evangelizing and helping churches grow*!” They didn’t bring me back for a second interview. Congregations are looking for men who stand behind the pulpit and go no further. They want men who simply center on the needs of the members. Brethren, a minister is not a babysitter! An evangelist is a servant of Christ with the mission of aiding congregations to grow spiritually and physically.

 Paul told Timothy, “*But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5).* The work of preaching the gospel is of utmost importance.

 When I attended the *East Tennessee School of Preaching and Mission,* I had just been discharged out of the military. I had applied for positions with the CIA and NSA. Since I was rejected by the CIA, I felt it was inevitable that NSA would also reject me. However, while at the school, NSA sent me a letter of acceptance. I had a dilemma. Do I stay in school and become a gospel preacher, or do I take on the prestigious position of working in intelligence? It was Billy Nicks who asked the necessary question: *“Would you be able to keep your family and faith*?”

 Brethren, at times it is necessary to give up fame, position, and fortune for the cause of Christ. If your position is taking you away from attendance and being faithful to God, do something about it! I would much rather dwell in a shack in heaven, than a mansion on earth!

 In Conclusion, do not devalue works. They are important. Our faith is proven by our works. That is the gest of James chapter two. By works we carry on the Great Commission. By works we mirror the Lord.