

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Precious Human Treasures

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All too often in this world, the elderly are ignored, neglected, and shunted aside by younger people. God's Word teaches us a better way, not just encouraging respect for the gray head, but also suggesting that the elderly among us still have a great deal to contribute. If nothing else, their experience contains a wealth of advice and wisdom.

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Is the Christian Required To Do Works?

Part Two

Part One addressed the issue of Christian works from a general perspective, showing that it is completely illogical to conclude, as some do, that no works are required for one to enter God's Kingdom. The New Testament contains a multitude of commands for the converted person to walk in Jesus' steps and works! Part Two will examine further evidence that works are absolutely required.

The apostle James writes, "Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. . . . But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?" (James 2:17, 20). He is saying that, just as surely as a dead person does no works, so a faith, a religion, that does not include works is also dead. Thus, a person in whom living, saving faith exists will produce works.

One must also consider Ephesians 2:8, 10, which tell us that salvation is by grace through faith, and that the Father created us for good works, which He prearranged for us to perform. Therefore, how can a person with a dead faith, one that produces no works, be in God's Kingdom, since he would be failing to do the very thing for which God is creating him in Christ?

Furthermore, we are to be in God's image and to imitate Christ. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." Our spiritual Father is a Creator, and a creator works. Most certainly, Jesus worked during His lifetime on earth, living a sinless life to provide us a means of justification. As our High Priest, He continues to work toward our salvation.

Sin's Corruption

The root of this issue is that people have a dismally vague knowledge of what sin is, as well as an equally weak appreciation for the dangerous filthiness of sin, which can prevent us from entering God's Kingdom. We live in an exceedingly sinful nation in which we are confronted by sin from every quarter, including from within. Sin is so blatantly exhibited that most people seem to treat it with casual indifference until some form of it—rape, murder, thievery, lying, gossip, an out-of-wedlock pregnancy, drunkenness, etc.—personally hits them.

So many are unaware of what sin is that they ignorantly participate in it. Television and movie "entertainment" overflows with it. In fact, sin is woven so tightly into the fabric of movies and TV shows that one could wonder if any other subject material exists! In America, over one million unborn children are aborted each year, and people euphemistically call this a "privacy right," hiding from the reality that they are murderers! What else can one honestly call the taking of life from an unborn human being created in God's image?

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Through Jeremiah, God accuses Judah of having a “whore’s forehead,” indicating a people so perverted and hardened in their sins they could no longer be shamed (Jeremiah 3:3). If we as a people have not reached that stage of degeneracy, we soon will because God cries through Ezekiel, “Make a chain, for the land is filled with crimes of blood, and the city is full of violence” (Ezekiel 7:23). Is there any other nation in the Western world that so openly exhibits as many violent crimes as the United States of America?

When one realizes sin’s stranglehold on the United States, it becomes clear that a majority of its people are either ignorant of their responsibilities to God and fellow man, or no longer care what God thinks. A recent Barna poll reveals that an astounding 76 million American citizens never darken a church doorway to receive spiritual and moral instruction. How can they possibly appreciate what sin is and does?

Of far greater concern, though, are those who may read this article. God’s ministers are responsible to make their teaching of God and His way as sharp and clear as they can so that those they teach can understand, not just the basics, but as broadly and deeply as possible so that it can be lived.

Wrong ideas about holiness usually lie in wrong ideas about human corruption. The responsibility of the Christian to seek the holiness of God provides the very reason God requires works. I Peter 1:15-16 charges us, “But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, ‘Be holy, for I am holy.’”

The obverse of this common ignorance of sin is that, without a firm understanding of human corruption, we have little appreciation of the radiant glory of God’s holiness toward which we are to strive! Sin lies exposed as the root cause of humanity’s corrupt condition, but many, even in the church, do not appreciate the depth of persistent corruption in themselves.

Let There Be Light!

When God began the material creation in preparation for man, He did so by providing light. Light reveals and makes a person aware. The same process begins the spiritual creation, as Paul explains in II Corinthians 4:6: “For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Peter confirms Paul’s comment in II Peter 1:19: “And so we have the prophetic word more sure, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.” While Paul confines light to the beginning of our conversion, Peter extends our need for the light all the way to the end of God’s creative process.

Vague, dim, and indistinct understandings of sin will never serve a Christian well. He must always apply his mind to growing in understanding to throw off spiritual vagueness and simultaneously glorify our Father and Elder Brother. If one does not grasp the depth of his carnal heart’s disease, it will constantly deceive him into thinking he has little to overcome, thus dragging him into pride. The human heart is so sick God tells us in Jeremiah 17:9 that it is incurable!

Scripture uses terms for sin that are easily understood, but unless one meditates on them, they may not provide a clear picture of sin’s many means of exerting its influence. The Bible’s terms generally mean something like “missing the mark,” “turning aside,” or “slipping off the path.” They can sound quite innocuous unless one recognizes the devastation sin has caused and ponders it seriously.

John Charles Ryle states in his book, *Holiness*:

Sin, in short, is that vast moral disease which affects the whole human race, of every rank and class and name and nation and people and tongue . . . “[A] sin,” to speak more particularly, consists of saying, thinking or imagining anything that is not in perfect conformity with the mind and law of God. “Sin,” in short as the Scripture saith, “is the transgression of the law” (I John 3:4). (pp. 1-2)

As the previous article stated, law must be considered in two forms: first, as a specific command, and second, as the whole body of God’s revealed will, as everything He says is absolutely true and righteous. God’s revelation is not merely a collection of suggestions to mankind. How can one “live by every word of God” if he is not using all of it to nurture his spiritual and moral life?

The Bible shows that sin exists in circumstances in which no overt, visible demonstration reveals it is being committed. Jesus makes it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that one can sin through lust by coveting another, and that one is guilty of murder through hatred. In neither case is the actual act committed, yet the person is guilty of sin before God.

Everybody is aware of sins of commission. In addition, sins of omission—leaving undone things we ought to do—are also a reality. Jesus teaches in Matthew 25:41-42, 45-46, concerning His second coming:

Then He will also say to those on the left hand, “Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink. . . . Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”

These are quite strong words to warn us about leaving good works undone.

In addition, some think that one may commit a sin in ignorance and be considered innocent. The reality is that the person is guilty even in his ignorance. Here, the saying, “Ignorance is no excuse,” comes into play. Leviticus 4 and part of Leviticus 5 deal with sins of ignorance. Notice Leviticus 5:17, “If a person sins, and commits any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD, though he does not know it, yet he is guilty and shall bear his iniquity.”

The New Testament, in Luke 12:48, has its own word on this aspect of sin: “But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much shall be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more.”

It would be good for those of us who are serious about pleasing God to spend more time in the book of Leviticus, which theologians have labeled as the Book of Holiness. One thing is sure: If we use our own imperfect knowledge of sin as the guide for evaluating our holiness, we will in all probability fall far short of measuring rightly.

Carnal to the Core

The Bible says our heart generates its evil products, and this process masks human nature, producing the sins we commit. The heart is the part of our innermost being that collects knowledge, processes it, and motivates its use. Today, we would refer to it as our mind. In Matthew 15:17-19, Jesus shows it to be the source of sin:

Do you not yet understand that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and is eliminated? But those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, and blasphemies.

Jesus also says in John 3:6, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.” *Flesh* is the Bible’s term to indicate a person being encumbered with all the attributes of human nature, including its natural enmity against God.

Jesus admits in Matthew 7:11 that, though evil, man is able to do good things too. God has given mankind intelligence and vision that enable him to accomplish wonderful works in architecture, music, biology, sculpture, dance, painting, writing, etc. However, that same mind or heart also possesses an enmity against God that will not subject itself to His law (Romans 8:7). The same verse says this enmity is so strong that it *cannot* be subject to God and His law!

Because of this, the human heart will produce deceit, evil temper, self-centeredness, malice, self-will,

self-indulgence, obstinacy, greed, envy, jealousy, narcissism, evil gossip, blasphemy, and many other corruptions. Sin pervades every part of our moral constitution and every faculty of our mind. Even our understanding, affections, reasoning powers, and will are affected. The conscience can become so blinded that it cannot be a sure guide. In Isaiah 1:6, the prophet laments that those of Judah in his day had in them no moral soundness from the tops of their heads to the soles of their feet.

This infection is worldwide. Regardless of whether one resides in the technologically advanced West or the “Black Hole” of Calcutta, India, the rain forests of central Africa or Brazil or on a lovely South Sea island paradise, all are driven against God and His law by varying degrees of carnality. No one, from the highest to the lowest, escapes God’s judgment against the sin in his life. Whether king or subject, rich or poor, well-educated genius or illiterate buffoon, all stand before God, condemned to death by their own conduct and attitudes: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

Human nature is so deeply planted and persistently strong that, even though one may be justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, having received the Spirit of God and become sanctified, sin still remains, influencing by whatever sneaky means to retain control of the convert’s life. The apostle Paul admonishes converted people, “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish” (Galatians 5:16-17). Carnality is buried so deeply within us that even a Christian with a new heart must battle mightily against its persistent pressure.

Paul had been converted for about twenty years when he wrote Romans 7:15-18, 23, declaring:

For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. . . . But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.

Sin is much like the leprosy in the walls of a house, as described in Leviticus 14:33-45: We cannot get rid of it until the house—this earthly body—is dissolved. The sin within is no longer controlling the converted person’s life, but it is not entirely gone, and this corrupt and filthy influence exerts its will in every situation to try to bring the righteous one down to its level in the gutter.

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A Truly Tragic Imperfection

Perhaps its most serious flaw is its deceit. Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.” This verse is among the best known of all verses in the Bible. Though we know the words, could we perhaps not grasp some of the depth of what Jeremiah is trying to convey, particularly its practical, everyday application?

It is interesting that the Hebrew word translated “deceitful” (*Strong’s* #6121) comes from exactly the same root as the name “Jacob” (which gives a bit of insight into the mindset of that famous Bible character in his pre-conversion days—God has the habit of naming things what they are). This word is used only three times in the Old Testament. It indicates “a swelling,” “a humping up,” and thus a knoll or small hill.

When used in relation to traits of human personality, it describes an inflated, prideful vanity, a characteristic that is distastefully useless, corrupting, and intensely self-serving. According to *Strong’s*, it also indicates something fraudulent or crooked. In other words, it suggests an intentional perversion of truth intended to induce another to surrender or give up something of value. What Jacob twice did to Esau gives a good idea of its practical meaning.

Today, we might say our heart is always attempting to “con” us into something that is not good for us in any way. Its inducements may indeed appear attractive on the surface, but further examination would reveal that its appeals are fraudulent and risky. In fact, its appeals are not only downright dangerous, it is incurably set in this way.

In Jeremiah 17:9, the Hebrew word is translated “deceitful,” but in the other two usages, it is translated “corrupted” and “polluted.” This word should give us a clear indication of what God thinks of this mind that is generating our slippery, self-serving conduct and attitudes. In His judgment, it is foul in every sense, to be considered as belonging in a moral sewer or septic tank.

The King James translators chose to use “deceitful,” and since it is a good synonym, just about every modern translation has followed its lead. *Deceit* is a cognate of *deceive*, which means “to mislead,” “to cheat,” “to give a false appearance or impression,” “to lead astray,” “to impose a false idea,” and finally, “to obscure the truth.” “Deceitful” thus indicates the heart to be brim-full of these horrible activities.

The term “desperately” (*Strong’s* #605) also needs definition. It indicates something so weak, feeble, and frail as to be at the point of death. Thus, most modern translations, including the KJV margin, have opted for “incurable.” Elsewhere, God calls it “a heart of stone,” as if rigor mortis has already set in despite it still being alive. In other words, nothing can be done about it, as it is set in a pattern of influence that cannot be changed

for the better. God promises, then, that He will give those He calls a new heart, a heart of flesh, one that will yield to Him and His way of life.

It is good to understand all these descriptors, but they only give us what amounts to book-learning on this vital topic. It is what its problems are in everyday, practical situations that makes God so dead set against it that He declares it “incurable.” It cannot be fixed to His satisfaction and is therefore unacceptable for His Family Kingdom.

We can understand why from this brief illustration: What are the two great commandments of the law? First: We are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37-38). In other words, we are to love Him above all other things. We are to respond to God’s wonderful, generous love toward us with a love that employs all of our faculties to match His love toward us.

Jesus says in Luke 14:26, “If any one comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.” Do we grasp the practical application of this? He means that we are to make whatever sacrifice is necessary, even to giving up our lives, to submit in obedience to any, even the least, of God’s commands. If at any time we put ourselves on equal footing to Him, we have actually elevated ourselves over Him and have committed idolatry.

The second great commandment is to love others as ourselves (Matthew 22:39). Though not quite as stringent as the first, it still is a very high standard. Jesus says that on these two commandments everything else in our response to God hangs (verse 40). Love and law are inextricably bound together in our relationship with God.

Yet, herein lies the problem. Keeping them is impossible for man as he now is, encumbered with this deceitful heart. Our heart will not permit us to do this because it is so self-centered it absolutely cannot consistently obey either of these commandments. Thus, no character of any value to God’s Kingdom can be created in one with a heart as deceitful and out of control as an unconverted person. It is incurably self-centered, self-absorbed, and narcissistic in its concerns about life’s activities.

This deceit has many avenues of expression, but none is more effective than to convince us we are far better than we actually are—but far better as compared to what or whom? Our hearts have an incredible ability to hide us from the reality of what we are spiritually and morally. It does this so effectively that it can harden us to the extent that we can be blinded to any and every failing in our character! It lures us into sin, hiding its seriousness from us and making us believe it to be a rather minor affair. It convinces us that “nobody got hurt” or “everybody’s doing it.”

In Hebrews 3:12-13, Paul issues a warning just as

applicable today as it was in the first century: “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” Sin promises more than it can deliver. It assures us of pleasures it never imparts. Sometimes it does deliver some pleasure, but it conceals the boomerang effect that will surely come. It also obscures its addictive power, invariably leading us beyond our original limits. When we first sin a specific sin, we are under delusion, and it will lead us step by step until we are enslaved to it.

It can put on plausible appearances, even the mantle of virtue, convincing us we are doing ourselves and others a favor. Sin deludes us with hope of happiness, but what does the gambler feel when he loses his bankroll, or the drunkard after he is burdened with a death caused by his drunk driving, or the fornicator who discovers he has AIDS, or the adulterer who must live with the fact that he has destroyed a marriage and family?

Human nature will generate any number of excuses—self-justifications, really—to avoid any sacrifice, no matter how small, or to admit any guilt that might damage its self-assessment of its value. It sometimes manages to produce narcissism so strong that all activity must have it as the center of the universe, and it will work hard to make sure it controls virtually everything. Pride and self-gratification are its driving impulses.

Surrounded by the Casual Acceptance of Evil

By insisting on “tolerance” over the last several decades, human nature has deceitfully managed to produce an open-minded acceptance of what was once commonly known to be sinful behavior. It has succeeded by maintaining that no absolutes exist regarding conduct, thus one morality is just as good as another. The nation has been bulldozed into accepting this deceitful concept by cooperative media, good-looking celebrities, savvy politicians, and liberal judges.

Thus, a polite, secular paganism has overtaken our nation, and many have become convinced that the gods and ways of the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Taoists, occultists, or whatever religionists are all the same. In one way, they are correct. They all do have the same god, but it is not the God of the true Christian religion and the Bible, One who adamantly insists on purity, chastity, and integrity of life in harmony with His commands.

We live in a time in the church’s history when the news mirrors conditions Christ and others said would exist just prior to His return. Paul writes in II Timothy 3:13, “But evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived.” This does not mean that, as we approach Christ’s return, human nature itself will get any worse than it already is, but that the expressions of its evil will intensify and increase. As

the heart’s evil acts multiply, greater inducements and opportunities are provided for everyone to be involved in its sinful ways.

In Matthew 24:37, Jesus states that, just before He returns, conditions will become as they were in the days of Noah. Moses reports under God’s inspiration in Genesis 6:5, “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” A plethora of evidence indicates that we are approaching such a time in our lives.

The apostle Paul adds in II Timothy 3:1-5:

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemous, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!

Perilous suggests “difficult,” “threatening,” and “dangerous.” The term “last days” does not specifically mean the times we are living in at this moment, as Paul believed he was living in the last days. He expected Christ’s return to be imminent, certainly during his lifetime, as many verses relate. Thus, he meant his instruction to Timothy to apply immediately. If this were not so, why would he tell Timothy in verse 5 to withdraw from the people he just described?

When combined with Paul’s thought in verse 13, the Greek grammar gives the sense of conditions or expressions of human nature that ebb and flow like waves of the sea rather than a constant state of affairs. However, when combined with the idea of things growing “worse and worse” and Jesus’ comments about the days of Noah, we can understand the situation will be especially intense in our time.

In addition, Paul did not intend us to suppose that everyone would express all of these traits all the time. Rather, all of them would indeed exist in each person since he is describing the elements of every human’s deceitful heart, but the intensity of their expression would vary from person to person.

The peril to church members is not to being injured or killed but to being drawn into expressing the same sinful attitudes and conduct that everybody else is! Paul’s warning is not to mix with people dominated by these characteristics. This helps us to understand that the potential to commit these sins is right in the church! Why? It exists in the church because we have all come out of the world where these things are nurtured, and none of us have overcome all these characteristics yet. In other words, despite conversion, we are still capable of expressing these sins. We must be on guard!

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The first characteristic Paul lists is “men will be lovers of themselves,” the wellspring of all eighteen subsequent traits. The wellspring remains in us, as Paul graphically explains in Romans 7. About this verse, William Barclay says in the *Daily Bible Study Commentary*:

Love of self is the basic sin, from which all others flow. The moment a man makes his own will the centre of life, divine and human relationships are destroyed, obedience to God and charity to men both become impossible. The essence of Christianity is not the enthronement but the obliteration of self.

New “religions” calling themselves “Christian” and having self-love as their very essence are popping up everywhere. These churches are quite popular, and their congregations tend to be large. In them, tolerance is a key concept, and the facts about the vileness of sin and man’s vital need of repentance are smoothed over. Additionally, they will not teach several true Christian doctrines, ones essential to salvation, because of their belief that they are “divisive.”

Truly, those doctrines do divide! They divide Christians away from the world yet unite them with God. These new religious groups are ignoring essential doctrines for the sake of so-called unity. Which is more important: unity with God or men? Men are easily deceived by their deceitful heart and blinded to their real state, believing all is well because everybody in the congregation is so “friendly,” because the “gospel” music is entertaining, because the slide program is informative, and because the church is growing so large. With all these “good” proofs, they reason, surely God must be blessing their “church”!

They are deceived. None of these things is necessary to salvation and a good relationship with God. They are not proofs of God’s blessing. Christ gives no indication His church would grow large. In fact He calls it a “little flock” (Luke 12:32). These churches may appear successful on the surface, but the fact remains that they are not teaching essential doctrines. They might as well be a weekly social center that also teaches some religious principles. Strong, detailed preaching about sin, repentance, and glorifying God through the works He demands must be part of Christian instruction, or the members will not grow in the grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ (II Peter 3:18).

The preachers promoting this agenda are cheating people through their smooth words, convincing them that sin is not nearly as bad as the Bible makes it out to be. Sadly, church members do not sufficiently realize the extreme subtlety of our heart’s disease. It does not come at us loudly proclaiming to be our deadly enemy, saying, “I want to ruin you in the Lake of Fire!” Sin comes like Judas, with a kiss, and like Joab, with his

hand extended in friendship and his tongue uttering flattering words.

To Eve, the forbidden fruit seemed desirable, but she was cast from the Garden, away from the presence of God. Sin came to David in the form of a beautiful next-door neighbor, and because of his lust, first produced adultery and then the murder of a loyal man. It seemed good to Saul and his men to spare the best of the animals and King Agag’s life, but consider what he lost!

Sin is sneakily attractive and very appealing to human nature, drawing our hearts toward it like a magnet. But can we appreciate that in God’s loving eyes it is vile and deadly? He is forming a Family Kingdom of children who seek to please Him with all their being. Sin cost His Son His life, and the Father will not budge one inch in upholding the sinless purity of His Family Kingdom. Though He is very merciful, His standards are firm.

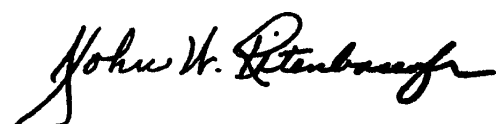
The purity of God’s holiness is so high that we cannot really come to grips with it. The blinding radiance of His glory is an external manifestation of the purity of His character. It is so radiant that to look on the face of God would kill a man. Some, like Isaiah, who was given a brief glimpse of God in some measure of His glory, cried out that he was undone (Isaiah 6:5)! The sight must have drained him of all energy in the fear that at any moment he would be struck dead. This same God puts no trust in His servants, charges His angels with folly, and before His eyes even the heavens are not pure (Job 4:18; 15:15)! Where do vile and corrupt men, who have a nature at war against Him, stand in His sight?

We have rubbed shoulders with sin all of our lives. We have watched it occur on a massive scale, and have committed it ourselves many times, while never once having witnessed a perfectly pure life as an example of how we ought to live. It was not until God called us and began to remove the veil from our eyes that a motivating consciousness of sin began to form in our minds. It is a solemn thought to know and believe that this ultimately pure Being can read our every thought—and He is our Judge! David declares that He desires truth in our inward parts (Psalm 51:6).

Surrounded as we are by sin, and thus in some measure accustomed to it, are we honest enough to search out sin in our lives by comparing ourselves to the holiness of our Lord and Savior? Can we admit that we have not upheld our baptismal vow to be loyal to Him who has saved us? Are we willing to commit ourselves energetically and faithfully to fighting and overcoming whatever remnant of human nature that remains in us?

[TO BE CONTINUED]

In Christian love,



Precious Human Treasures

When I first met him, I was a young, new-to-the-church, impressionable 14-year-old. Mr. Finnegan was not a handsome individual—in fact, he was a rather skinny, homely man, with his most obvious feature being eyes that bugged out in an unusual manner. Also memorable was the food he would cook, which was often seasoned by an unusual assortment and quantity of spices, none of which he could taste, since his ability to smell and taste were seriously impaired. He loved to make wine and mead out of many things, his favorites being potatoes and dandelions.

I remember thinking at the time that, as an older man, he had his fair share of “ancient” and eccentric ways—not exactly someone a young person would consider cool or would want to hang around. Yet, looking back at that time in my life, Mr. Finnegan made a lifelong impression on me in a way that each of us can have on others, if we follow certain instructions given within the pages of the Bible.

Willing To Share

Paul instructs the much younger Timothy in I Timothy 6:17-19:

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

Most of us have favorite memories of events and people that have left a lasting impression in our minds. One individual from my family’s past was a man named Mr. Finnegan. I had not thought about him for years, but he came to mind a few years back when he became a focal point for a sermonette. I had forgotten how much of an impression he made on me until I concluded the message with a few memories of him. As happens at the most inopportune times, tears welled up in my eyes.

In my memories of Mr. Finnegan, these words seem to apply to his life and legacy. By no stretch of the imagination was he a wealthy man in terms of goods or money. His richness, especially to a young person, was in his willingness and ability to share of the one thing he had the most of: *himself*.

The word *share* in this passage comes from the word *koinonikos*, which actually means “to be liberal or generous” or “apt or ready to communicate.” From these definitions, Paul’s teaching would include doing good works, willingly giving of what we are and what we have become, and sharing our lives through deeds *and* words. This is where Mr. Finnegan had the most impact on my life, and where we can learn a great lesson.

Even though Mr. Finnegan had very little in common with a 14-year-old, he did have the time and desire to share experiences with one. Many an outing included Mr. Finnegan, from cutting and selling firewood for our youth group to staying with me at various times when needed. We had many discussions about bookbinding (he used to bind the church publications together for people), wine making, and his past, both good and bad experiences. While he was not spending money on me, he was sharing what he had—time, effort, stories, and wisdom, imparting a part of himself as a member of one generation to another.

Hebrews 13:15-16 reads, “Therefore by Him let us

continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” For many of us, the ability, opportunity, desire, and obligation to follow the first half of this admonition occurs without question in our lives. After all, praising and giving thanks to God is a Christian’s duty. For some, the harder part is taking Christianity one step further, sacrificing ourselves in service, fellowship, and communication with others, especially those outside our “community,” be it a group designated by age, experience, likes or dislikes, location, or any other boundary that applies to us personally.

As we will see later, this willingness to give of ourselves must be a key piece in linking one generation to another. It is and must be a dual obligation: the older teaching the younger, as well as sharing experiences widely, not just with those we are most comfortable with.

Throw-Away Generation

In many ways, my experiences with Mr. Finnegan have aided me in showing respect for older people. While we did not always have “current” things in common, his time and effort with me have helped me to see the benefits in the time and effort I spend with those both older and younger than me. Since becoming a grandfather, it has been greatly emphasized to me, especially as I realize how malleable children are, what an impact I can have on their lives.

It is easy to see how readily we can influence beautiful, eager children, but it is far more difficult to see others as worthy of our time and efforts. Mr. Finnegan had no family, so many of us in the area became his surrogate family. In this way, he also gained from those he spent time with, who were willing to give of themselves to him. The reality for many of us, however, is that we usually have family, which takes a great deal of our time and effort, leaving little time for others. In the bigger scheme of things, as God is building His Family through the church, every person is important to the equation, as Paul exhorts us in Ephesians 4:16.

Contrast this to the way things have become in today’s world where we throw a thing away when we have finished with it. In some ways, that is how many see those of the older generation, as people who are not as “useful” or necessary as they once were. This dismissive way of thinking can—and unfortunately, often does—become a reality for the older generation. Many of them feel that society is saying, “Get out of the way so younger people can take over.”

Today, there is a wide gulf between generations. Respect and honor, well-deserved by the older generation from the younger, has been replaced with an attitude of indifference. Too often, seniors are considered to be castoffs and perceived to be in the way rather than as invaluable assets to teach and nurture the younger and less-experienced among us. Due to their perception of this attitude, many older people seem to recede into a shell

either because they no longer feel like a part of “the young people’s world” or because it becomes too much of a struggle to remain productive, purposeful, and focused. Thus, they do not impart their experience to the younger generations. Much is lost.

God is very specific on how He feels about the worth of older people. He commands in Leviticus 19:32, “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD.” Proverbs 16:31 teaches, “The silver-haired head is a crown of glory, if it is found in the way of righteousness.” Job 12:12 adds, “Wisdom is with aged men, and with length of days, understanding.”

Conversely, Psalms 71:9-17 shows how many older people can feel and think, especially in a world where family, loyalty, experience, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom are not held in as high esteem as they should be.

Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength fails. For my enemies speak against me; and those who lie in wait for my life take counsel together, saying, “God has forsaken him; pursue and take him, for there is none to deliver him.” O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! Let them be confounded and consumed who are adversaries of my life; let them be covered with reproach and dishonor who seek my hurt. But I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more. My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and Your salvation all the day, for I do not know their limits. I will go in the strength of the Lord God; I will make mention of Your righteousness, of Yours only. O God, You have taught me from my youth; and to this day I declare Your wondrous works.

For our younger people, these are words that each should take to heart, before many of our older people are no longer around to share their lives and experiences with us. We should take it as a personal responsibility to make room for the elderly to remain an integral part of our lives, so we can learn from their deeds and experiences, even when it may not seem convenient in our fast-paced lives. An older man once reminded me that slowing down often produces superior results, as I in my furious pace to shovel sand lost most of it—while each of his scoops never lost a grain.

A Shared Responsibility

Psalm 71:18 continues with the old person’s plea and desire to do what he should: “Now also when I am old and gray headed, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to everyone who is to come.” This individual felt a personal responsibility. It was not specific just to family, friends, or acquaintances, but to everyone to come.

(continued on page 18)

THE COLD CULTURE OF SILENCE

PART ONE

“Prison is a pathetic substitute for genuine parents.” J.R. Morse

Just the facts, ma’am:

- Living in a step- or single-parent household more than doubles the risk of delinquency by age 14.
- The likelihood that a young male will engage in criminal activity increases substantially if he is raised without a father.
- Boys who grow up outside of intact marriages are, on average, more likely than other boys to end up in jail.
- Youngsters who are actually in the juvenile justice system disproportionately come from disrupted families. In Wisconsin, 13 percent of inmates in juvenile correctional facilities came from families in which the biological mother and father were married to each other. By contrast, 33 percent had parents who were either divorced or separated, and 55 percent had parents who had never married.
- Seventy percent of youth in state reform institutions across America have grown up in single- or no-parent situations.
- Swedish adolescents in single-parent house-

holds were twice as likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, twice as likely to attempt suicide, and about one and a half times as likely to suffer from a psychiatric illness. Parental history of mental illness accounts for very little of the variation in these various adolescent problems.

- There is a link between living in a single-parent household and some kinds of emotional problems over the individual’s *entire* lifetime. Children growing up in broken homes are more likely to suffer from a wide range of problems, including depression, anxiety, phobias, and obsessions, over their entire lifetime. In addition, as children, they are more likely to be aggressive and disobedient during childhood.

That is how Jennifer R. Morse (“Parents or Prisons,” *Policy Review*, August/September 2003, p. 49) encapsulates the findings of a number of recent studies on youthful crime. In most cases, these studies tried to “correct” statistically for poverty and other “confounding factors that might be correlated with living in a single-parent household.” Together, the studies indicate that the state of a youngster’s family is a primary determinate of his risk of displaying anti-social behavior or suffering mental illnesses as a child and as an adult. No wonder Morse concludes:

prophecy watch *The Cold Culture of Silence*

Without parents—two of them, married to each other, working together as a team—a child is more likely to end up in the criminal justice system at some point in his life. Without parents, prison becomes a greater probability in the child's life.

Strictly speaking, then, the peril that children raised in fractured families face does not have its roots in economics. That peril, therefore, cannot be alleviated or eliminated by pouring money into a welfare system, either public or “faith-based.” Nor is it fair to say that the heightened risk these children confront has racial or ethnic causes. Many immigrant families, after all, display a traditional family solidarity not seen in the homes of Americans who have lived on these shores for generations.

Rather, the dangers and risks these children will face throughout their lives have their foundation in *wrong* parental choices. By that measure, then, *parental* cannot mean “private.” For, there is no victimless crime, no victimless sin. Wrong-headed parental decisions hurt all of us.

CARE, CONSCIENCE, AND CAUSES

There are certainly a number of reasons why a broken home is a stepping-stone to prison or psychosis for many. Morse focuses on two.

The first is fairly obvious. Two parents can detect a child's behavior problems, and work to correct them, better than one. It is a matter of task-sharing. For instance, two parents, sharing the important charge of educating the child, can better ensure that the job is done right. Scholastic achievement often suffers in children in single-parent families because the only parent is also the breadwinner, and hence lacks the time and energy to answer questions and to ensure that homework gets done properly.

Poor achievement in school, in turn, cascades into a number of other problems. The child comes to hate school because he fails there. It is not surprising then that youngsters in single-parent homes exhibit a notably greater proclivity to drop out of school. Finally, dropouts have a greater chance of entering the justice system than youngsters who complete high school. It is like one domino knocking over another.

Morse admits that the second reason, while it seems plausible, displays “a weaker causal connection.” That may be due to the lack of definitive studies to date. Briefly, Morse holds that children who grow up in single-parent homes are more likely to suffer from what psychiatrists term “attachment disorder.” She explains that a child in a “fractured” family situation may not

form strong human attachments during infancy. A child obviously cannot attach to an absent parent. If the one remaining parent is overwhelmed or exhausted or preoccupied, the child may not form a proper attachment even to that parent. Full-fledged attachment disorder is often found among children who have spent a substantial fraction of their infancy in institutions or in foster care. An attachment-disordered child is the truly dangerous sociopath, the child who doesn't care what anyone thinks, who does whatever he can get away with.

An infant's attachment to mother is vital in the formation of his conscience. Mothers and infants generally attach by simply “being together.” The child comes to understand that human relationships are good because they guarantee his continued survival. In time, the child learns to trust and care about his mother. *He comes to care about what she thinks of him.*

As the child internalizes her values and standards, he begins to develop a conscience. Growing older, a word from mother, or just her facial expression or body language seen from a distance, can indicate to the child her approval or disapproval of his conduct. Since he cares about her, he modifies his conduct to conform to her standards. Eventually, she does not even need to be present. “Mother would disapprove,” the older child reasons, “so I won't do it.” Conscience has formed. It usually lasts a lifetime.

Emphatically, we in God's church understand that it may not be a conscience founded on God's law—ultimately in accord with God's standards. Mother's standards may not be—and usually are not—God's standards. Yet, a conscience it is, nevertheless. It is so powerful that it constrains, indeed controls, the actions of a child, an adolescent, an adult, a senior. That is, it continues to function long after mother has died.

An infant in a single-parent home, often cared for (but not loved!) by a paid stranger while the mother is working, stands a good chance of never making this all-important attachment to his biological mother. Such an infant stands a good chance of never developing that check on hurtful impulses that a conscience affords. He grows to become a child—and then an adult—without a properly developed conscience.

Subsequently, he does not care about what his mother or father thinks of him—he does not care what anyone thinks of him. Unmoored to any standard of conduct except the one dictated by his own selfish impulses, he will do what he wants to do, which is anything he thinks he can get away with. Such a

person has one foot in a prison yard and the other on a banana peel.

COSTS ON TOP OF COSTS

Morse cites just one of many theories concerning conscience development. Child behaviorists differ in their approach to the subject. However, there is one thing that none can debate: The costs of disrupted families are high to the child, to his family, and to society at large.

First, there is the cost to the child's family. These are hidden costs, but they can take their toll, financially and emotionally. Parents (or a single parent), reacting to a "problem" child, will seek help from grandparents, uncles, aunts—anyone who can provide extra guidance for and supervision of the child. Often, placement of the child in a private school whose staff specializes in behavior-disordered children becomes necessary. If the family has the money, this is often a boarding facility. Alternatively, the family may engage the services of a child therapist.

However the family chooses to deal with the child's problem, it, rather than the public, "bears the brunt of the child's behavior." The emotional and financial stress can tear what may already be a fraying fabric of family life. Frequently, it has injurious effects on siblings, as time and money showered on a "black sheep" invariably mean fewer resources devoted to the more "normal" children in the family.

If the behavior becomes disruptive enough, the authorities become involved. The problem, that is, goes public. Now, *everyone* pays for the judges, police, probation officers, social workers, prison staff, psychiatrists, and parole officers. The list goes on and on. How much does it cost? Consider these figures, all based on California costs:

- The prison budget was six percent of state budget in 2003.
- Adult prison costs average about \$26,700 per person per year. While in prison, many prisoners are not contributing to the larger economy by consuming or by paying taxes. They add little to the state's GDP.
- The annual cost of caring for a juvenile in the California Youth Authority averages \$49,200 to tax payers. If the child were in school, the cost to taxpayers would average only \$8,568 per year. If the young person were in a community college environment, the average cost to taxpayers would be still less: only \$4,376 per year. If the young adult had entered one of

the institutions in the University of California system, the cost to taxpayers would be \$17,392 per year. Ergo, it costs about \$9,000 *less* per year to educate a young person at UCLA than to incarcerate him in an adult institution.

Consider this: More likely than not, the college graduate will return the costs of his education to the economy many times over during his lifetime, as he becomes a productive worker, a taxpayer, and a consumer. However, money spent on prison, writes Morse, "has little prospect of turning the individual into a more productive citizen. These expenditures merely neutralize the negative impact on society of an individual who can't or won't control himself."

Criminologists do not bet on rehabilitation any more. Prisons are built to *separate* people who can control themselves from those who cannot. While schools are an investment in the future, prisons are merely a necessary means of controlling damage inflicted by a failed family in the past.

These damage-control costs have risen exponentially during the last half century. This is largely because, according to Bradford Wilcox ("Children at Risk," *First Things*, February 2004, p. 12), "in the 1950s, almost 80 percent of children spent their entire lives in an intact family, whereas in the 1990s only about 50 percent of children spent their entire childhood with their biological mother and father." Divorce hurts.

There are other, more subtle, costs to consider. Expenditures in the juvenile justice system have negative ramifications for *other* government services. After all, there is only so much money to go around! Funds dedicated to maintaining correctional institutions and systems crowd out funds that could be allocated to more useful services such as road construction, preventative health care, education, sanitation, and the arts.

An individual who opts for divorce, Morse concludes, or a teenager who determines to rear a child without his father, is making a risky decision. "The choices regarding family structure have significant spillover effects on other people. We can no longer deny that such admittedly very personal decisions have an impact on people other than the individuals who chose."

Well, these are the facts. Next month, we will look at the course of action Morse recommends to brighten the bleak picture they paint. Her answer does not mimic the liberal mantra of pouring good money after bad into an already failed welfare system. God's people may find her solution as intriguing as it is challenging. It calls for breaking silence and courageously speaking out.

—Charles Whitaker

“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

What Would You Do With a Second Chance?

**Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you,
up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.”
—Matthew 18:22**

How many of us have, when experiencing the calamitous consequences of some foolish course of action, exclaimed, “If only I had a second chance, I would. . . .” Often Almighty God grants us second chances, third chances, fourth chances, etc., and we either put these priceless opportunities to good use, or hopelessly botch and squander them. We all stumble, we all make mistakes, and we all inevitably beg our Creator for yet another chance. God believes in second chances, but there are strings attached to these fleeting opportunities—namely repentance and change.

God’s forbearance or patience toward our habitual sin and misconduct has predictable limits:

So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance? But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. (Romans 2:3-5, NIV)

Nevertheless, when we come to the end of our tether, reaping what we have sown, we feel compelled to say, “If only I had another chance, I would” Would we really?

“If Only”

Stephen Crane in his short story, *The Open Boat*, makes this insightful observation:

It is, perhaps, plausible that a man in this situation, impressed with the unconcern of the universe, should see the innumerable flaws of his life and have them taste wickedly in his mind and wish for another chance. A distinction between right and wrong seems absurdly clear to him, then, in this new ignorance of the grave-edge, *and he understands that if he were given another opportunity he would mend his conduct and his words, and be better. . . .* (Emphasis added.)

In the 1978 film, *The End*, Burt Reynolds portrays a man with a terminal illness, who in desperation hires a homicidal maniac to kill him. When he discovers he does not have a terminal illness, he must artfully dodge his hired predator. In one scene, Reynolds’s character bargains

with God, “If you will spare my life, I will give you 90% of everything I earn. Has anybody ever promised that?”

When the danger of his assassination apparently diminishes, the bargain with God rapidly diminishes to 80%, 70%, 60%, 50%, 40%—down to nothing. When the assassin suddenly appears again, Reynold’s character renews the 90% pledge until the danger passes again. How typically human! Former Senator Walter Mondale’s father, a Methodist minister, once remarked that the problem with deathbed repentances is that, when the patient recovers, he goes back to his old destructive habits.

I cannot say I am exempt from such behavior. Several years ago, after pushing my faithful lawnmower beyond its point of endurance—attempting to wean it from its rightful quota of oil—I realized it was complaining about the abuse. I opened the oil-fill, observing a column of smoke ascending from the interior. In remorseful panic, I started to fill the crankcase with oil. I then pulled on the starter cable only to find the motor had apparently locked up. “Oh no,” I cried, “If only I had a second chance, I would. . . .”

The next day after taking the mower to a small-engine mechanic, I learned that I had not destroyed the engine as I feared. As the engine started and the manifold coughed out plumes of thick smoke, I was extremely grateful to hear the motor come back to life. But, unfortunately, my neglectful behavior continued, and I ended up with a parallel predicament about a year later.

I reflect on the thousands of second chances I have been given, only to revert to self-destructive behaviors:

- On my yearly visit to the dentist, the hygienist gives me a lecture on the proper method of flossing and brushing. When the cleaning exposes a cavity or perhaps the need for a crown—or worse yet, a root canal—I suddenly become insightful about what I should have been doing daily for the past year. “If only I had a second chance, I would. . . .”
- I have been repeatedly warned by my colleagues to back up my computer data on CDs or external storage. When I have on occasions lost data, I remorsefully and contritely exclaim, “If only I had a second chance, I would. . . .”
- Several times I have lifted weights on the bench-press without a spotter, exceeding (just a little) what I knew to be my capacity, only to have to extricate myself from my foolishness. “If only I had a second chance, I would. . . .”

My list of “if only” moans could go on at length, but the common denominator of all these incidents is that when we are given a second chance, we need to make sure that we do not squander the precious opportunity. We have to come to realize that we cause tomorrow’s “if only” regrets by today’s neglects.

Multiple Chances

Often second chances actually seem to reinforce destructive negative behavior as the Proverbs 19:19 reveals: “A man of great wrath will suffer punishment; for if you deliver [rescue] him, you will have to do it again.”

Our Elder Brother Jesus Christ advocated giving people second chances, third chances, or more chances as He counseled us to learn to forgive:

Then Peter came to Him and said, “Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?” Jesus said to him, “I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.” (Matthew 18:21-22)

Scripture is replete with examples of individuals who, when given second chances, put those trusts and confidences to good use. It also shows poignant examples of individuals who squandered their opportunities. Sometimes, it takes several failed opportunities before the one given another chance actually develops the character to make good on the opportunity.

One of Jesus’ disciples started to develop a reputation as a deserter, almost to the point that

the apostle Paul initially considered him a lost cause. John Mark reveals the first embarrassing failure about himself, which occurred on the night Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Now a certain young man followed Him, having a linen cloth thrown around his naked body. And the young men laid hold of him, and he left the linen cloth and fled from them naked” (Mark 14:51-52).

This pattern of desertion and shirking responsibility was repeated in the company of the apostle Paul: “Now when Paul and his party set sail from Paphos, they came to Perga in Pamphylia; and John [Mark], departing from them, returned to Jerusalem” (Acts 13:13). The text gives us no reason for his abrupt departure.

Paul was so angry about this desertion that he sharply told Mark’s cousin, the apostle Barnabas, that he did not want to keep this good-for-nothing deserter or traitor in his company one day longer:

But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work. Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. . . . (Acts 15:38-39)

Barnabas was willing to give his seemingly derelict cousin one more chance. A church of God minister used to say, “A friend is someone who, if we botch something up royally, does not think we’ve done a permanent job.” Barnabas evidently believed his cousin could redeem himself. Fortunately, for Mark, this trust was well-placed.

Even the apostle Paul, many years later, put aside his former animosities and resentments when he realized that this “one more chance” provided by Barnabas brought about in Mark the genuine fruits of repentance:

- Aristarchus my fellow prisoner greets you, with Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him). . . . (Colossians 4:10)
- Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful to me for ministry. (II Timothy 4:11)

Historical Second Chances

A most notable scriptural example of someone begging for a second chance is King Hezekiah, whom God mercifully gave an additional 15 years of life:

In those days Hezekiah was sick and near death. And Isaiah the prophet, the son of Amoz, went to him and said to him, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Set your house in order, for you shall die, and not live.’” Then he turned his face toward the wall, and prayed to the LORD, saying, “Remember now, O LORD, I pray, how I have walked before You in truth and with a loyal heart, and have done what is good in Your sight.” And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then it happened, before Isaiah had gone out into the middle court, that the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “Return and tell Hezekiah the leader of My people, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of David your father: “I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; surely I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the LORD. And I will add to your days fifteen years.”’” (II Kings 20:1-6)

Tragically, Hezekiah squandered his second chance when he foolishly let his pride in his possessions get the better of him, endangering his kingdom (as well as his relationship with God) by foolishly displaying his wealth to Babylonian envoys. Isaiah had to warn him that for his foolishness, his family and kingdom would be taken into captivity:

Then Isaiah said to Hezekiah, “Hear the word of the LORD: ‘Behold, the days are coming when all that is in your house, and what your fathers have accumulated until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left,’ says the LORD. ‘And they shall take away some of your sons who will descend from you, whom you will beget; and they shall be eunuchs in the

palace of the king of Babylon.” (II Kings 20:16-18)

Hezekiah marred his second chance through foolish behavior.

Ironically, Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, began his reign as one of the most vile and evil kings, seducing Judah and Israel into idolatry. However, when he reaped what he had sown, he begged for and received from Almighty God a second chance:

Therefore the LORD brought upon [Judah] the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon. Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God. . . . He took away the foreign gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built in the mount of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem; and he cast them out of the city. He also repaired the altar of the LORD, sacrificed peace offerings and thank offerings on it, and commanded Judah to serve the LORD God of Israel. (II Chronicles 33:11-13, 15-16)

As wicked as he had been, Manasseh made the most of his second chance, showing not only personal strength of character, but also leaving us a wonderful example of God's grace and mercy.

Changing the Outcome

God is willing and able to give us a second, a third, a fourth, and a fifth chance. We, then, have to consider whether we are going to bring forth the fruits of repentance. Before we rashly cry, "If only I had a second chance, I would . . .," we need to soberly reflect on the caveats that accompany these plaintive requests. Consider the warning Jesus gives in one of the fig-tree parables:

He also spoke this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:6-9)

In a similar vein, the apostle Peter issues this stern warning to those who become rescued from their sins, yet plunge back into their former behaviors:

While they [false teachers] promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption; for by whom a person is overcome, by him also he is brought into bondage. For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: "A dog returns to his own vomit," and, "a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire." (I Peter 2:19-22)

The author of Hebrews, presumably Paul, gives a parallel warning about frivolously throwing away opportunities for repentance:

For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briars, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned. (Hebrews 6:4-8)

Probably the most fearful warning (appropriated by Jonathan Edwards in his sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*) is the sobering admonition in Hebrews 10:26-31 (NIV):

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Back in the early 1950s when the polio epidemic ravaged the nation, public service billboards, urging vaccines or inoculations, began to appear across the country with pictures of children in wheelchairs, crutches, and iron lungs with the bold caption: "Don't Press Your Luck." This warning applies in spades to our eternal life.

God's mercy and forbearance are obviously infinitely greater than our own, and we can rejoice in them. Nevertheless, when we ask for a second chance, we need to commit ourselves soberly to following through by truly repenting and changing the outcome to a positive, godly result. When we cry out, "If I only had a second chance, . . ." make sure the sentence ends, ". . . I would *not squander it!*"

—David F. Maas

Precious Human Treasures

(continued from page 10)

As is usually the case with God, due respect and honor also includes increased responsibility and accountability. Any minister will agree that with "double honor" (I Timothy 5:17) goes "double responsibility" (James 3:1). The same is true for the older members of the church, as discussed in Titus 2:1-5, which is preceded by Paul's admonition to Titus on the need for faithful elders in the various congregations. It is probably no coincidence that Paul first speaks of the qualifications for an elder (*presbuteros*, meaning one who is either older or senior in rank), only to follow up with the "qualifications" needed by the older people within the church.

But as for you, speak the things which are proper for sound doctrine: that the older men be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience; the older women likewise, that they be reverent in behavior, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things—that they admonish the young women to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be blasphemed. (Titus 2:1-5)

God obviously saw the ongoing need within the church to have clear leadership and education, not only from ordained elders, but also from the older, more experienced, God-fearing people in the church, who should lead by example and exhortation. It is a major responsibility that

God expects from all involved, both from those teaching as well as from those being taught.

While Mr. Finnegan, who has since died, was far from perfect, he did leave a big impression where it counted. He took it upon himself to get involved in a new church family's life and to give us something of himself. It did not matter if it was offering us his latest wine concoction, coming to stay with me while my family went out of town to attend a funeral, making us some of his horrible Irish stew, or helping our youth group sell and stack firewood, *he gave of himself*. Once a person got past the "not so pretty exterior" that made up his outward appearance, or his somewhat cantankerous personality in his later years, it became plain that Mr. Finnegan was a gem. He left a positive legacy because he was not afraid to get involved, to give of his time, and to apply what the Bible says an older person should do for the younger generation.

The real questions for us are fairly simple: Are we allowing our older generation to be and remain a valuable tool as God has ordained? Do we recognize them as a key to the ongoing development of God's Family, or have we fallen prey to the hustle-and-bustle approach of this world? Do we really regard those with years, wrinkles, gray hair, and aches and pains as precious human treasures, or have we relegated these wonderful assets to the trash bin of society?

God says in Proverbs 20:29, "[T]he splendor of old men is their gray head," and then He says in Proverbs 23:22, "Listen to your father who begot you, and do not despise your mother when she is old." This is good advice for all of us.

—Rod Keese

Illegal Immigration and the American Crisis

In their bestselling book *The Fourth Turning*, William Strauss and Neil Howe note that, for the last 600 years of British and American history, a regular cycle of major crises have occurred roughly every 80-100 years. They identify as crises the Wars of the Roses, with its climax in 1485; the Armada Crisis, with its climax 103 years later in 1588; the Glorious Revolution, with its climax 101 years later in 1689; the American Revolution, with its climax 92 years later in 1781; the Civil War, with its climax 82 years later in 1863; and the Great Depression and World War II, with its climax 81 years later in 1944.

Strauss and Howe posit that these national catastrophes and consequent resolutions are a function of the roles and characteristics of the various generations that play out their respective historical scripts. Based on this demonstrable pattern, the authors predicted (in 1997) that the next crisis would begin sometime between 2005 and 2008, and climax in 2025. Present national barometers—whether political, cultural, economic, religious, or demographic—indicate intense and growing pressure that cannot be gently relieved, but that will only be fully released when the next national crisis begins.

Immigration trends in American history are also cyclical, and in fact, can be a good indicator of how close the next crisis is:

Immigration to America has also followed a saecular rhythm [referring to the span of a long human lifetime, 80-100 years, that defines the various cycles of British-American history]: It tends to climb in an Awakening [1964-1984], peak in an Unraveling [1984-200?], and fall during a Crisis. The climb coincides with quickening social mobility, rising public tolerance, pluralist-minded leaders, and loosening social controls. The Unraveling-era reversal is triggered by a *sudden nativist backlash* (in the 1850s, 1920, and 1990s). The subsequent fall coincides with aggressive new efforts to protect the nation—and by the time a Crisis hits, immigration is often *seen as unsafe by the community* and unattractive by those who might in better times wish to relocate. (*The Fourth Turning*, p. 113; emphasis ours.)

By all accounting, the U.S. finds itself in the late stages of such an Unraveling, a period usually 15-25 years in length characterized by

[ebbing] public trust amid a fragmenting culture, harsh debates over values, and weakening civic habits. Pleasure-seeking lifestyles coexist with a declining public tolerance for aberrant personal

behavior. . . . As moral debates brew, the big public arguments are over ends, not means. Decisive public action becomes very difficult, as community problems are deferred. Wars are fought with moral fervor but without consensus or follow-through. Eventually, cynical alienation hardens into a brooding pessimism. . . . The approaching specter of public disaster ultimately elicits a mix of paralysis and apathy that would have been unthinkable half a saeculum [40-50 years] earlier. People can now *feel*, but collectively can no longer *do*. (*ibid.*, p. 103; emphasis theirs.)

April's and May's massive marches, demonstrations, and walk-outs—including the "Day Without an Immigrant" boycott—as well as the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants already in the U.S., point to the "peak in an Unraveling" that Strauss and Howe document during previous cycles of history. The crisis is not yet upon us, for illegal immigration appears to be still *increasing* because of the hope of an amnesty program.

Additionally, the upcoming congressional elections in November intimidate all but the most stalwart politicians from making "inflammatory" remarks against illegal immigration, and an already-weakened President Bush does not have the political clout to press the issue of illegal immigration, even if he had the inclination. A complicit liberal media continues to cast illegal immigration in a positive light. Business owners are still willing to overlook the illegalities in favor of cheap labor. For now, things are going the illegal immigrant's way.

But if *The Fourth Turning* is correct, this will radically change during the Crisis—or perhaps a radical change will *herald* the beginning of the Crisis. Already, independent newspapers and bloggers are publishing the not-so-friendly pictures the mainstream media avoids. The Minutemen Project—voluntary border patrols in the Southwest—is gaining in popularity and recognition, and the founder is considering running for President in 2008 on the Constitution Party platform. Not least of all, the sight of tens of thousands of immigrants marching under the Mexican flag looks to the average American more like an invasion and less like a civil rights movement.

Throughout the cycles of history for over half a millennium, immigration is always a hot topic preceding a national crisis, one that can be used as an indicator of the national mood. While the immigration issue may not be the actual catalyst that ushers in the next crisis, the building pressure in this area is clearly contributing to the overall fragmentation that leads to the crisis.

—David C. Grabbe

The Parables of Matthew 13

Part Seven: The Parable of the Pearl

The first four parables of Matthew 13 are darkened by an ominous cloud. In contrast, the last four cast light on the assurance of a positive future for the saints. In this second of the chapter's third pair of parables, Jesus reveals more secrets to His disciples regarding the high value God places on the church. The Parable of the Pearl (verse 45) particularly reveals the high cost to God of acquiring potential members of His Kingdom.

Until we are baptized members of God's church with the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we cannot understand the full meaning and purpose of God's plan. As Asaph writes, "When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end" (Psalm 73:16-17). This parable helps us understand God's perspective.

Between the Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Parable of the Pearl, we can notice this distinction: The Treasure is made up of units of precious things, such as coins and gems of various kinds, although they are collectively one treasure. The Pearl, however, is a single object. These two illustrations—both of which conclude at the same place, the completion of the purchase—represent different aspects of the same truths: the *costliness* of the Treasure or Pearl, and the *joy* of the Purchaser.



1. Whom does the merchant represent? Matthew 13:45-46.

COMMENT: The merchant is seriously and deliberately searching the world to secure the best and costliest gems. It is his livelihood, and he is diligent to travel extensively because he knows his efforts will be rewarded when he finds the best and purchases them. Since Christ is the One who seeks the sinner (Luke 19:9-10; John 6:44), the merchant *cannot* represent the members of God's church (Romans 3:11). The Shepherd seeks the sheep, not vice versa.

The use of the word "seeking" (Matthew 13:45) helps identify the merchant as Christ, as it means "to depart from one place and arrive at another." Jesus did this Himself to pay the price for the pearl. He departed from heaven and arrived on earth to complete His mission (Philippians 2:6-7; II Corinthians 8:9). He gave up everything—He sold all—to possess us!

2. What is the significance of the pearl? Same verses.

COMMENT: Unlike other gems, pearls are produced by a living organism, an oyster, as the result of an injury. It usually begins forming around a grain of sand or an egg of some parasite that invaded the oyster. The oyster protects itself by layering the irritant with nacre (mother-of-pearl) until, out of pain and suffering, it forms an object of great beauty. The offending party actually becomes a gem of great worth.

In a similar way, spiritually, we are an irritant, a parasite due to our nature and sins (Romans 3:23-26). However, because God loves us, we are covered by the blood of Jesus Christ, and gradually, we can become a thing of beauty, clothed with the righteousness of Him who bought us (Romans 3:24-26; Ephesians 2:13). As long as the pearl—the church—remains in the oyster—

the world—it has no value. In fact, the pearl has no real intrinsic worth; its value resides in the immense cost paid for it.

3. How does grace apply in this parable?

COMMENT: The doctrine of God's grace is essential in understanding this parable (II Corinthians 9:15; Romans 6:23). The merchant is willing to buy the pearl at an exorbitant cost. No one can buy salvation or the Kingdom of God or eternal life for himself. Grace would not be grace if one were able to barter with God (Luke 7:41-42). According to Scripture, we have no righteousness, no talents, no goods, nothing that is of any value in purchasing such a priceless gift from God (Isaiah 64:6). Peter's denunciation of Simon Magus clearly shows that no one can buy what belongs to God (Acts 8:17-24).

Further, we do not choose Christ but He selects us (John 15:16; Luke 19:10). Since He is the merchant, the price paid was His life, and the church is the pearl. The church is one body (Ephesians 4:4), composed of those He has sought out through the ages to be a habitation of Christ by His Spirit and who will be His bride at His return.

The Pearl presents a wonderful picture of the purchase of the church in preparation for the Kingdom of God. It is encouraging to know that Jesus does not seek us in reluctant fulfillment of duty. Nor is He groping in the dark, hoping that we will respond to His plea, but He seeks us out with an efficient, organized, pre-planned goal in mind. He pursues us as a man courts a woman to be his bride, willing to spill His own blood as her purchase price (Acts 20:28). What greater price could have been paid for the church than the life of Jesus Christ, the perfect sacrifice?