

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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Is there such a thing as luck, or do we live in a world in which blind chance or fate governs every act? Does God's Word have anything to say on the subject? Would a sovereign God leave the oversight of His creation—especially His begotten children—to coincidence?

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Is the Christian Required To Do Works?

Part Three

Previously, we saw that sin is an overwhelming reality throughout the entire world. Regardless of location, race, ethnicity, or gender, nobody escapes committing sin because all are encumbered with a nature at war with God and thus not subject to His law (Romans 8:7). In fact, mankind commits so much sin that it seems that he is barely able to keep it contained. Satan's deception is so thorough that most people on earth commit it without being aware that they are doing it!

The churches of this world have abandoned the law of God and are badly divided by sectarianism. Buried under an avalanche of false doctrines, they give no indication through the witness of their church members that it can rise to offer any effective defense against sin's pervasive influence. The churches have lost their power.

The world is filled with violence resulting from sin. We observe violence in warfare, violence in the streets, violence against the unborn in the sterile surgical rooms of abortion clinics, and with euthanasia becoming more commonplace, violence against the elderly, the terminally ill, and others deemed not worthy of life.

The public is frequently assaulted by “spin” from the government and commercial marketers that is often nothing more than polite lies, deviations from truth that are fully intended to mislead its hearers away from the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

To squeeze every dime out of their harvests, corporate farmers rob our food of many of its nutrients through poor growing methods, and mass production further compounds that damage by spitting out processed junk foods—and we wonder why so many are sick so early in life! Lately, pharmaceutical companies have been accused of greatly exaggerating statistical occurrences of certain illnesses and/or deficiencies in order to sell their drugs and so increase their profits.

We could examine each of the Ten Commandments in this manner, but these few examples give an overview of the undeniable fact that morality—of which God's laws are the standard—is almost completely swamped by a veritable ocean of sin, with our own among the rest of mankind's.

That God has not blown up the entire planet is certainly a testament to His confident vision that He can bring something beautiful and good out of what He has made, despite man's tireless and unrelenting

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efforts to destroy it. Above all, it speaks superabundantly of His grace. Is there anything in God's great creation we in our enmity against Him have not attempted to defile, corrupt, and destroy completely through sin?

This situation cannot get any better unless sinning stops or is stopped. History reveals that life in general can be made marginally better in a given culture for brief periods, which happens occasionally after a devastating war. Early on during a period of peace, when people are too disgusted and exhausted to make war any more, they turn their attention to the far more positive labors of reconstruction. Thus, the quality of life rises because not as many people are sinning so egregiously.

Even so, no government or religion has enough spiritual, moral, or physical power to stop sin in its tracks. Overcoming sin is a very personal problem. It is not just the other person who sins: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). In this context, the glory of God is that He, by way of contrast to us, is holy. He does not sin—ever!

Each person must take it upon himself to stop sinning. Nobody can live life for another; the strong godly character of any person cannot be transferred to another. Because of human nature's deceitful self-centered pull, imitating another's evil example is relatively easy. All one has to do is to go along with the flow of the crowd. But following true moral instruction and imitating the good works of another so that one does not sin are exceedingly more difficult. Each person must face the truth about his own flawed character, allow himself to be convicted of his need to stop it in its tracks, and then put righteousness into action.

One human cannot stop sin in another, for as we saw in Part Two, a person can sin within himself in his lustful thoughts, and no one else even knows it has happened. Overcoming sin is an individual burden each must strive to achieve before God.

Many, having some knowledge of sin, sincerely want to do this. However, the Bible reveals there is a major "catch." It can be accomplished only in a close, successful relationship with God because the enabling power to overcome sin must be given by God within that relationship.

God's Calling and Overcoming Sin

Once one becomes more thoroughly aware of the exceeding sinfulness of sin within himself—so aware and concerned about what God thinks of him that he wants to do something about its very real existence in his life—it elicits the question, "What must one do?" Notice the word "do." Does this not indicate activity of some kind? In other words, are we willing to expend some measure of energy—work—to begin stopping sin in our lives?

The person who experiences a deeply felt guilt re-

garding his sinful nature and broken relationship with God comes to understand from his study of God's Word—a work in itself—that it frequently appeals to the disciple to keep the commandments of God—another work. Yet, the world so often objects that works are not required for salvation, that one could become confused.

Obviously, something or somebody is wrong somewhere along the line. God's Word contains no contradictions, and in many places, it definitely commands the doing of works. At least eight times the Bible says we will be judged or rewarded according to our works. Since the Bible does call for works, could people be confused as to precisely *when* they are to be done?

There is a very good reason why so much sin exists. God certainly has the power and the will to stop it, but the time has not yet come in our sovereign God's purpose and plan to do this. Revelation 12:9 informs us, "the great dragon . . . , called the Devil and Satan, . . . deceives the whole world."

God Is Not Idle

Because people lack faith and do not see God at work, they carelessly assume that He has gone off somewhere or that He does not care what man does. This is far from the truth. He is working out a clear plan, one that is easily seen if one will only believe. Sadly, we are living in a part of the plan in which He has essentially left man to his own devices under Satan, the god of this world (II Corinthians 4:4).

Despite doing so, God is not inactive by any means. Humanly, we are impatient; we want things accomplished in a hurry (James 1:4-6). Did not God work out all the events concerning Israel and have them recorded in the Old Testament for our learning (Romans 15:4)? Does not God's Book show He formed the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into a nation and gave them kings like David, Hezekiah, and Josiah to further His plan? Did not God raise up prophets like Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel to deliver messages to inform us? Did not God send Jesus Christ to preach the gospel, live a sinless life, die for our forgiveness, and raise Him to glory as our High Priest and soon-coming King?

God took 4,000 years to arrange all the details and assemble all the parts necessary to form the church and to get its part in His plan launched on the Pentecost following Christ's resurrection. It is obvious to anyone familiar with the Bible that God's perception of time is different from man's. During all that time covered by the Old Testament, He was working toward the same objective that He is engaged in during this present age. Nothing deters Him.

God is closely involved in what is happening on earth. Jesus says in John 5:17, "My Father has been working

until now, and I have been working.” Psalm 74:12, written over two millennia ago, states, “For God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth.” Jesus adds in His prayer in John 17:4, “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.” Clearly, God retains control of what is happening in all His creation, but presently, His will restricts how involved He is in people’s lives compared to what His involvement will be following Christ’s return. That event will mark the beginning of the next major step in mankind’s conversion.

This becomes obvious if one is willing to believe the Bible’s clear statements that God is being selective about whom He offers salvation to at this time in His plan. Overall, God is “not willing that any[one] should perish but that all should come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). However, Paul clarifies this in I Corinthians 15:22-23: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.” This is not the only day of salvation.

The apostle Paul answers many questions on this subject throughout Romans 9–11. Notice Romans 9:13, 15-16, 18-23:

As it is written, “Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.” . . . For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.” So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy. . . . Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens. You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?” But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, “Why have you made me like this?” Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor? What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had prepared beforehand for glory. . . .

While this passage contains the barest of information on this subject, it clearly reveals that God is offering salvation to some and not to others. Jacob and Esau are clear historical examples of this fact. They were twins, but God, even before they were born and had done absolutely no works, made a choice between them. Jacob was selected, and Esau was not.

The same principle is true regarding Christian access to God and the salvation it makes possible. For millennia, God seemingly ignored the Gentiles, but after Christ’s

resurrection, this changed dramatically with Cornelius’ calling and conversion (Acts 10:17-48). God is following a well-designed plan of selecting some and not others, and He is still observing that pattern to this day. He is not offering salvation to everyone just yet.

Only Those Called

The notion held by the overwhelming majority is that a person is free to come to God at any time. Yet, answer this simple question: Is just anyone free to go before the king of a country at any time he wants to? Is any American free to knock on the President’s door and gain entry into his office? It is almost impossible to see a corporate president, let alone the President of a nation!

People’s notions of the sovereign dignity and holiness of the Creator of all things has been warped by a distorted, humanistic perception of Him, so that they barely consider respect for Him and His mighty office. Conversely, just a brief vision of Him caused the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and the apostle John to swoon as if dead. Looking on Him in the undimmed brilliance of His radiance would kill a man.

A person cannot decide on his own to “come to Christ” and be accepted. This does not mean God will not hear and on occasion respond to the sincere prayer of even the unconverted, but that is far different than voluntarily “coming to Christ” for the purpose of being converted. Scripture clearly shows that one must be summoned by God Himself (John 6:44). Until a person meets the qualifications God demands for anyone invited into His presence, he has no access to the enabling power to overcome sin.

Notice this startling announcement Jesus made to the Jews of His day: “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is but the Father, and who the Father is but the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him” (Luke 10:22). We all have many misconceptions about both the Father and Son, but is this verse true? Yes! It says that all our conceptions about the Father and Son are wrong unless the true Son has been revealed to us, and He in turn then reveals the Father!

It is no wonder there are so many religious groups calling themselves Christian! Except for one, all the conceptions of Jesus and His way contain falsehoods patterned after *Satan’s* revelation of Him to them! He has indeed deceived the whole world. John 6:44 clearly states in Jesus’ own words, “*No one* can come to Me *unless* the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (emphasis ours throughout). The apostle Paul confirms in Philippians 1:29, “For to you it has been *granted* on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.” Access to the Father and Son *following* His invitation is a privilege granted. It is an aspect of God’s grace.

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Consider: Did Noah simply volunteer to build the ark? Did Moses seek out God to lead Israel out of Egypt? How about David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc.—did they apply to become God’s prophets? Did not Jesus appoint the Twelve, telling them to follow Him? Regarding this principle, no one is a clearer example than Paul—he was an out-and-out enemy! One can even say that the Father runs His whole operation through Jesus Christ, whom He *appointed* to this task. The Father chooses whom He will.

Why should we think that God’s clearly established pattern in the Old Testament should be any different for us in the New Testament? One cannot just barge into His operations. Such hubris mankind has! This certainly reflects how scanty mankind’s knowledge of and reverence for God are. Instead of deferring to Him at every turn, people treat Him as if He were common. Surely, the apostle Paul is correct in quoting David in Romans 3:18, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

God calls each person individually into the church/kingdom/family/government He is producing to carry out His operations. He has planned for the next step in His purpose.

Justification and Sanctification

At this point, we need to discuss the terms *justification* and *sanctification*. We will concentrate on justification first, mentioning sanctification only by way of contrast. Justification is absolutely essential to overcoming sin within the self. Why? Because without justification one has no access to God.

How, then, can one be justified? In Psalm 143:2, David makes a heartfelt appeal to God: “Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous.” In one sense, our sins have cast us all into the same untenable quandary. How can we have a relationship with a holy God when our conduct is so inferior that we are unacceptable for a relationship, despite greatly desiring it?

If it is possible to have such a relationship, will changing our sinful conduct through great sacrifice and effort, disciplining ourselves to obey every commandment of God about which we know, make us acceptable? People have crawled on bloody hands and knees from a mountain’s foot to its peak to impress God with their sacrificial devotion in hopes of being forgiven. Will such painful sacrifices impress Him enough to earn entrance into His presence? Some will fast for long periods, while others will spend all their adult lives behind the stone walls of a monastery, poring over sacred works or praying continuously after taking a vow of utter silence. Do such things make a sufficient impact on God to open the doors to His throne room?

None of these truly impressive acts or any of a similar nature removes either the ugly, death-incurring blot that stains our hearts and characters or the blemishes on our record of sinfulness. God has a better way, the *only* way justification can be granted.

Justification is a metaphor taken from the law court. It and its cognate terms can indicate “alignment with a standard,” “acquittal,” “clearing of guilt,” “innocent,” “equitable,” and “righteous.” Interestingly, the verbal root of all these applications means “to point out.” The words formed from this root point to a norm or standard to which persons and things must conform to be “right.”

This ties directly into our modern English word *right*, derived from the Anglo-Saxon *richt*, which means “straight” or “upright.” The *Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* notes that within the Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English terms for justification, “the common idea is the norm by which persons and things are to be tested. Thus, in Hebrew, a wall is ‘righteous’ when it conforms to the plumb line, a man when he does God’s will” because he is living according to that standard (vol. 10, p. 483).

How, then, can a man, burdened by a corrupt human nature that has motivated sinful deeds all his life, be just before God? Job and his three friends argue this very point through many chapters in the book of Job. Job’s friends attempt to find the reasons for Job’s sorry state of affairs. They consider Job to be guilty of a—or perhaps many—egregious sin. Their arguments generally consist of either accusing Job or extolling God’s holiness, and Job then defends himself. In Job 9:2, he responds to Eliphaz’ charge by questioning, “But how can a man be righteous before God?” He then goes on to extol God’s greatness in many different ways, strongly implying, “What can a man do that could possibly please God since He is absolutely righteous in character, He has everything, and all that He does in governing His creation is righteous? No man can possibly measure up.”

Bildad seconds this in Job 25:4: “How then can man be righteous before God? Or how can he be pure who is born of a woman?” The general theme of their arguments is that, since God is so holy and righteous and His judgment is so penetrating, He leaves no wiggle-room for man to claim innocence in any situation. Bildad essentially says that the best thing a person can do is to keep his mouth shut and not complain about his lot because things could be worse!

King David adds another factor certainly worth considering due to his open honesty and his refusal to dodge the issue of where he stood before God in the matter of his sins: “Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done this evil in Your sight—that You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge” (Psalm 51:4). He openly admits that he deserves whatever God dishes out. In other words, he

has no excuse, no justification of his own that will clear him of guilt.

Jesus has an encounter with a lawyer, a man accustomed to splitting hairs over matters pertaining to the application of God's law. The issue is keeping the two great commandments of the law. When Jesus tells him to do these and he would live, the man responds by asking a question, prompting Jesus to give the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Luke 10:29 reveals what motivated his question: "But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?'" This lawyer is apparently guilty of sins of omission. He wants to appear righteous, that is, in alignment with what is good. He wants to seem better than he actually is because Jesus' answer has hit a sore spot or at least an area in which the man felt vulnerable.

The truth is that there is *nothing* a man can do to justify himself if what he does involves the expending of energy in accomplishing a work, even the works of obeying the commandments.

There are two major reasons for these works' unacceptability. First, no offering that any man other than Christ could bring to God is without blemish. Man's every offering, no matter how severely he may beat his body to discipline himself, is already tarnished by immorality, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). A man's just act or acts cannot make up for previous infractions.

All of the instructions on the requirements for making a burnt, grain, peace, sin, or trespass offering on the altar before the Tabernacle or Temple declare that the animal must be without blemish. God repeats this instruction in excess of fifty times! Why? All of these animals point to the sinless Christ, who is the only acceptable sacrifice for our justification and forgiveness. Thus, all men are disqualified on this count.

The second reason these works are unacceptable also deals with the value of the sacrifice for our justification. No human being can pay the price for the sins of the whole world. God requires a life of sufficient value or worth to nullify that immense quantity of sins and their destructive power. The only acceptable sacrifice able to meet this is the life of the very instrument of creation. The Creator alone is of greater value than what He has created. Thus, all men are also disqualified on this point, too.

The Apostle Paul's Example

The apostle Paul was a man of unusual zeal for righteousness long before God ever called him. In Acts 22:3, he testifies before a group of hostile Jews, "I am indeed a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in the city at the feet of Gamaliel, taught according to the strictness of our fathers' law, and was zealous toward God as you all are today."

In Galatians 1:13-14, he provides evidence of his unusual zeal to the Galatian congregation:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation, being more exceedingly zealous for the traditions of my fathers.

He expands on this in Philippians 3:4-6:

... though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.

Despite this background of lifelong zeal, when God called him, he began to perceive that sin was very much alive in him. He started to notice elements of its depth to which he had been blind. He gives an example in Romans 7:7-12:

What shall we say then? Is the law sin? Certainly not! On the contrary, I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire. For apart from the law sin was dead. I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died. And the commandment, which was to bring life, I found to bring death. For sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it killed me. Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

This is the man, one of exceptional zeal and spiritual insight, who strove for righteousness but who nonetheless occasionally fell into sin through the onslaught of his nature, to whom God chose to reveal His truth regarding justification by faith in Christ's blood. Paul came to realize that, regardless of how hard he tried not to sin, he nonetheless did sin, marring the offering of his life to God. Without faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice, there would be no justification and thus no access to God. Not even Paul could measure up to this standard.

Freely Given Gifts

The cry of all of God's prophets, including Jesus, is that before one can have access to God, the one who is invited must repent. Jesus cries out in Luke 13:3 and 5, "I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish." In Acts 2:38, the apostle Peter also, concluding

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his long message on the Day of Pentecost, instructs, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

John the Baptist, whose ministry immediately preceded Christ’s, urged those hearing him to repent:

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” . . . But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them. “Brood of vipers! Who has warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.” (Matthew 3:1-2, 7-8)

Access to God ultimately depends on one being called of God and justified by the blood of Jesus Christ because they have expressed their faith in His blood, repented of their sins, and brought forth fruit as evidence of their faith and repentance. Are not works by those called involved in this process? Absolutely! Faith, repentance, and producing fruit are spiritual works.

Do these works count toward justification? In John 6:27-29, Jesus clearly calls faith a work:

“Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him.” Then they said to Him, “What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?” Jesus answered and said to them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.”

Faith—believing—is a work. But how does this square with Ephesians 2:4-5, 8?

But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved). . . . For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God. . . .

The *New Testament Commentary* illustrates this apparent contradiction:

The roots of a tall oak perform a well-nigh unbelievable amount of work in drawing water and minerals from the soil to serve as nourishment for the tree. Nevertheless, these roots do not themselves produce these necessities but *receive them as a gift*. Similarly, the work of faith is the work of receiving the gift of God. (John, p. 232; emphasis theirs)

The faith to believe in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the faith that leads to repentance and producing fruit as evidence, is a gift from God resulting from His calling and His revealing of Himself and His Son. All that follows a person’s choice to use that faith is the result of the gift given initially. Without faith being given first, an individual would not repent or produce any fruit; he would simply continue living in his deceived state.

Thus, God’s granting of justification is a freely given gift. It is freely given on His part, that is, He gives it without constraint to one He has called, not because the called one has earned it. However, it will cost the receiver of the gift considerably, for if he chooses to continue to seek access to God, he must give up his life to the One who bought Him. Paul states this plainly in a somewhat different context:

And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? (Romans 2:3-4)

Thus, being able to repent is also a gift of God, but we must choose to do it.

If these things are gifts of God, how then can justification be earned as the fruit of one’s labors? One does not earn a gift. A gift is something given because of the liberality and kindness of the giver.

Distinctions Between Justification and Sanctification

It is important to our spiritual understanding to grasp the similarities and differences between justification and sanctification, of which there are several. It is perhaps paramount to recognize that both proceed originally from God’s freely given grace. It is by His gift alone that believers are justified or sanctified at all.

The result is that believers are both justified and sanctified. Both processes begin at the same time, when the sinner expresses his faith in Christ and repents. The sinner may not feel them occur, but this is nonetheless a fact of everyone’s salvation.

A justified person is always also sanctified, and a sanctified person is also justified. Therefore, both are part of God’s great work of salvation. Christ, therefore, is the fountain of life from which forgiveness (justification) and holiness (sanctification) flow. Both are necessary to salvation. No one will enter the Kingdom of God without being justified, nor will one enter the Kingdom of God without being sanctified—holy, fit for living in it.

(continued on page 18)

Do You Feel Lucky?

Well, do *you* feel “lucky?” We use the word “luck” all the time in our daily conversations: “good luck,” “you lucky dog,” “he lucked out,” “I was just lucky” and so on. Does luck really exist?

A small article appeared in *Parade Magazine* on June 6, 2004, titled “Do You Believe in Luck?” in which four teens were asked this question. Jorge Gonzalez, 15, responded, “There’s no such thing as luck. The Bible says the last leaf on a tree will not fall if it’s not the will of God.” He is probably referring to Matthew 10:29, in which it is a sparrow that falls, not a leaf, yet, even so, his thinking is still pretty deep for a 15-year-old!

Conversely, note how Katherine Kelsch, 14, answered:

A year ago, I begged people to buy cookies for a school fund-raiser. I really wanted the prizes you could win. But the reward system was based on the luck of the draw: the more cookies you sold, the more chances you got to draw for the prizes. Some students won cool stuff, like a lava lamp phone and a minibike. On my turn, I got a handful of Tootsie Rolls. Whoo hoo! That didn’t seem fair. Even though I worked really hard, I lost to stupid bad luck.

The fact that those who sold more cookies had more chances to draw and thus more chances to win better prizes seems not to have made much impact on poor Katherine.

Some years ago, country singer Mary Chapin Carpenter had a hit song, called “I Feel Lucky.” It is about a woman who wakes up one morning, reads her horoscope, calls in “sick” to work, buys a lottery ticket, and wins 11 million dollars. It has a catchy tune that, I must confess, I sing along to when I hear it on the radio. Then, a few years ago, there was the movie character “Dirty Harry” Callahan, played by Clint Eastwood, who uttered the catchphrase, “Do you feel lucky?”

Innate or Self-Made?

Are some people in life lucky and others unlucky, or do we make our own luck? English psychologist Richard Wiseman, who conducted a study on the subject of luck, was interviewed by *Fastcompany*, an online magazine, about his findings.

For centuries, people have recognized the power of luck and have done whatever they could to try seizing it. Take knocking on wood, thought to date back to pagan rituals aimed at eliciting help from powerful tree gods. We still do it today, though few, if any, of us worship tree gods. So why do we pass this and other superstitions down from generation to generation? The answer lies in the power of luck.

Over a ten-year period, Wiseman kept track of 400 men and women volunteers. These people, of all ages, who “considered themselves especially lucky or unlucky,” kept diaries, submitted to interviews, completed questionnaires, took tests, and participated in experiments. The

results? Lucky people get that way “via some basic principles.”

His results dovetailed with the “Positive Mental Attitude” espoused by a long line of self-help gurus from Norman Vincent Peale to Anthony Robbins. These proponents of proactive self-sufficiency advocate steps like taking advantage of opportunities that come one’s way. As Wiseman points out, “Unlucky people miss chance opportunities because they’re too busy looking for something else.” In other words, work hard, save money, utilize personal talents, and do not expect lottery winnings to fund life on Easy Street.

Wiseman also discovered a wide gap in the way they handled misfortune between those who perceived themselves as lucky and those who thought of themselves as unlucky. The “lucky” people looked at the bad things that came their way, and after a time concluded, “It could have been worse.” The unlucky ones let problems and trials immobilize or even devastate them.

The bottom line in this man’s study seems to be that a person makes his own luck. A lucky person does not blame others for the state he is in, and he works to improve his lot in life. He does not lay back and wait for his luck to change but takes steps to change it himself through work. Benjamin Franklin once wrote, “Diligence is the mother of good luck.” In the same vein, comedian Bob Hope said, “I’ve always been in the right place at the right time. Of course, I steered myself there.”

Luck for the Converted?

This is all fine for those in the world who are not converted, but how about for those whom God has called? Is luck involved in our lives? John Ritenbaugh once said in a sermon, “[God] doesn’t leave the smaller details of our lives to chance or luck.” Martin Collins has also commented, “Within the sovereignty of God, there is no such thing as pure chance for God’s people.”

Yet Solomon writes in Ecclesiastes 9:11:

I returned and saw under the sun that—
The race is not to the swift,
Nor the battle to the strong,
Nor bread to the wise,
Nor riches to men of understanding,
Nor favor to men of skill;
But time and chance happen to them all.

Does this verse contradict these statements? What does Solomon mean? How could the fastest runner not win the race? How could the strongest man not be victorious in battle? Is all human activity subject to fate?

Time in this verse means “opportunity,” and *chance* suggests “occurrence” or “incident.” We all have the opportunity to make something of our lives, but eventually, death occurs to us all. Moffatt translates this phrase as “death and misfortune happen to all.” Ecclesiastes 2:14

reinforces this, “The wise man’s eyes are in his head, but the fool walks in darkness. Yet I myself perceived also that the same event happens to them all.” Albert Barnes notes, “[Event] does not mean chance, independent of the ordering of Divine Providence: the Gentile notion of ‘mere chance,’ or ‘blind fate’ is never once contemplated by the writer of this book.” Good or bad, we will all have the same fate, death, because we have all sinned.

A writer once stated in a magazine article, “Life is a lottery, not a chess game.” We can only assume that he meant that we ultimately have no control over our lives and the events surrounding us. While this might be true to an extent, in the strictest sense of God’s sovereignty, he is well off the mark. We always have the ability to rebel against God, to say “No,” and walk away from our calling. God is always in charge, but we do have free moral agency.

A Chance of Rain

The dictionary defines *chance* as “the abstract nature or quality shared by unexpected, random, or unpredictable events; luck; the likelihood of occurrence of an event.” Chance suggests total absence of design or predictability. It essentially leaves God out of the picture. While it does rain on the “just and the unjust,” as Christ says in Matthew 5:45, and trials affect us all, it is not luck or chance that governs our lives.

On a recent Fourth of July, my family and I went to Stone Mountain Park, outside Atlanta, Georgia, for the laser and fireworks show. We usually go every year, and it rains on us just about every year. Sure enough, after three trips back to the parking lot, lugging blankets, coolers, chairs, and so on to the lawn in front of the mountain and putting them in place, we had a sudden shower. We huddled under the tarp of the man next to us and waited it out. A lot of folks packed up and went home. True, our blankets were soggy, my newspaper and novel were soaked, our hair looked weird, but we had a great time. We all got rained on. That was chance, an unexpected and random event.

Luck is defined as “the fortuitous happening of fortune or adverse events.” Being caught in a rain shower could be called bad luck, although a possibility of showers was in the forecast. But was it an adverse event? That depends on one’s outlook. Was God involved? Sure, He was. There was lightning along with this rain, and we were sitting in an open field. He answered our prayers and kept the lightning away from us. Did He make it rain on us? Probably not. It was a random event.

However, God was in control at all times. He protected and guided us. Had the lightning been on top of us, had I sat in the middle of Stone Mountain’s large lawn holding a metal rod, and had I been struck and killed, would that have been bad luck or stupidity? The answer is obvious. Random events happen to us all, but luck does not control our lives.

(continued on page 18)

THE COLD CULTURE OF SILENCE

PART TWO

“Speak, LORD, for Your servant hears.” I Samuel 3:9

Last month, we looked at the curse of broken homes. We noted the magnitude of problems fractured families spawn, as well as the vast emotional and economic costs they entail. To break up a marriage is to damage much more than just the couple who divorce, for a single-parent family puts children at risk, disrupts the extended family, and weakens society at large. The victims of divorce and of fornication are everywhere. Some costs pay down quickly; others last a lifetime. Some are obvious; others are hidden. Jennifer Morse (“Parents or Prisons,” *Policy Review*, August/September 2003, p. 49) concludes that the choices adults make “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.”

In suggesting a solution, Morse does not chide divorced parents for irresponsibility or reprove single mothers for immorality. What is done is done. Nor does she urge expanding welfare budgets, a proven non-winner. Rather, *she issues a call to break silence and to speak out, to educate young people, alerting them to the risks inherent in single parenthood.* The facts are before us, Morse stresses: Study after study bears witness to the certainty that fractured families hurt everyone in a plethora of ways. This “accurate information is a necessary educational tool in reversing the culture of despair around the institution of marriage.” Her remarkably insightful conclusion deserves extended quotation:

A young woman needs to know that the decision to have a child by herself is a decision that exposes her and her child to a lifetime of elevated risks: of poverty, of lower education, of depression, and of prison. . . . We are not doing the young person any favors by acting as if we are ignorant of the likely consequences of her choices. The time-honored American ethos of “live and let live” has metamorphosed into a categorical imperative to keep our mouths shut.

For years we have heard that single parenthood is an alternative lifestyle choice that doesn’t affect anyone but the person who chooses it. We have been instructed that society should loosen the stigma against it in order to promote individual freedom of choice. . . . There are no better or worse forms of family, we are told. There are no “broken families,” only “different families.”

prophecy watch *The Cold Culture of Silence*

The premise behind this official posture of neutrality is false. The decision to become a single parent or to disrupt an existing family does affect people outside the immediate household. . . . We need to create a vocabulary for lovingly, but firmly and without apology, telling young people what we know. Surely, telling the truth is no infringement on anyone's liberty. Young people need to have accurate information about the choices they face. For their own sake—and ours.

An "imperative to keep our mouths shut" is a demand that we keep silent. Yet, perhaps we can recognize the folly of this "imperative" through an illustration from nature. Geerat Jermeij, a professor of Geology at the University of California at Davis, wondered about the dissimilarity of noise levels around a tide pool in tropical Fiji and around a tide pool in cold Washington State ("Listening to a Tidepool: Curiosity and the Unfamiliar," *The American Scholar*, Summer 1998, p. 29). It takes energy, he realized, to sound off, and in cold climes animals lack the spare energy to make noise. Of the tide pool in Washington State, Jermeij concludes: "The tidepool was silent because it was cold."

GLOBAL WARMING OR COOLING?

Contrary to pop science, the globe is not warming but "waxing cold," and in the world's loveless, lonely chill, people do not expend the energy to speak. On the street, they do not make the effort to say, "Hello," or "Good morning." In silence, individuals move about their own little cocoon, too uncaring to take the risk of speaking, lest they offend someone. The atmosphere of toleration that we all breathe today is a frosty one, and it has generated a culture of silence. "Don't ask, don't tell." Do not reprove your children—your voice might stunt their development as individuals. Mute your opinions, lest you rub someone the wrong way. "We don't talk about politics or religion at this table. People get upset." Silence renders relationships shallow.

The ubiquitous "I'm okay, you're okay" religion, where all is relative and nothing is sure, has produced a culture of the verbally unwilling. People are disinclined to speak out against evil, even

if they may be personally persuaded that "it isn't for them." The age of individualism, when people can live out their preferences, give free reign to their impulses, and act out their "orientations," inclines us to adopt a ho-hum stance toward moral issues. A certain "I don't

**To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven . . .**

Ecclesiastes 3:1

care, as long as it doesn't bother me" attitude pervades the atmosphere—a quiet apathy. This, the silence of indifference, is malignant. People are silent because their love has grown cold.

People of this "Me Generation" remain silent until they become *personally* inconvenienced. How quick they are to honk their automobile's horn should you delay them ever so little! Yet, seldom do they become exercised over *moral* issues. Ms. Morse understands that, and though some will not heed, we still have a responsibility to develop "a vocabulary for lovingly . . . telling young people what we know." This is love, that we be neither silent nor nonchalant. Solomon says it best in Ecclesiastes 3:1, 7-8:

To everything there is a season,
A time for every purpose under heaven: . . .
A time to keep silence,
And a time to speak;
A time to love,
And a time to hate. . . .

This is the season to speak in love (Ephesians 4:15). Soon enough the night will fall, when none can work (John 9:4). Now is the time to develop that vocabulary, that language, which will powerfully warn people, especially the young, of the consequences of their actions. God Himself warns, "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23).

God is not taciturn, does not remain silent, but "in various times and in different ways"

(Hebrews 1:1) speaks, never taking action “unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). Speaking is His habit, and He expects the same behavior of us His children. Thus, Amos, enthralled with God’s message to him, exclaims in the next verse, “The Lord God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?”

**A lion has roared! Who will not fear? The LORD
God has spoken! Who can but prophesy?**

Amos 3:8

Amos was driven to speak, as was the prophet Isaiah also; he shuns silence, opting instead for the loud voice. He writes in Isaiah 58:1: “Cry aloud, spare not; lift up your voice like a trumpet; tell My people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.”

To use Morse’s terminology, we need to speak up, telling young people that:

- “children attach to the rest of the human race through their first relationships with their parents”;
- “disrupting those foundational relationships has a major negative impact on children as well as on the people around them”; and
- “the primary determinant of a person’s life chances is whether he grew up in a household with his own father.”

THE OBLIGATION TO SPEAK OUT

We need to speak, not just about marriage, but about everything: family, substance abuse, violence, the correct worship of God, abortion, euthanasia, financial irresponsibility—about life. Though few will listen, we need to speak all the same. God tells us through the prophet Ezekiel that He will require the blood of the heedless sinner at the hand of the silent watchman (see Ezekiel 33:1-11). Silence is not golden, but leads to the hopeless coldness of the grave.

This does *not* mean God’s people should deploy themselves to every corner of every intersection of every metropolis in America—with megaphone raised to mouth. This is a common sight in Los Angeles, where self-appointed preachers shout out some erroneous version of the gospel in Spanish—and sometimes even in English! No, but we have responsibilities to sound off all the same.

To speak out effectively, we first must *know* God’s way of life in depth. Being “ready to give an answer” (1 Peter 3:15) when asked requires more than “book learnin’.” It means knowing how to frame our answers in a way people can grasp, succinctly and precisely. Helpful answers, like “apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11), need to be at the tips of our tongues, “on the coffee table,” as it were, for anyone who wishes to hear or read.

Even more importantly, we need to make sure we *live* God’s way, not just know it. *The living witness of God’s way is the effective witness.* That is how we fulfill our roles as watchmen to the corrupt “Me Generation” around us. Actions do speak louder than words.

1 Samuel 3 tells a story that should be instructive to all of us. God calls out in the night to the boy Samuel. Finally, he answers, “Speak, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:10). True to form, God does speak: “Behold, I will do something in

Israel at which both ears of everyone who hears it will tingle” (verse 11). God then tells Samuel that He would judge the house of Eli, for he had not restrained his sons from “making themselves vile” (verse 13). In the morning, a curious Eli asks Samuel about his conversation with God. “Then Samuel told him everything, and hid nothing from him” (verse 18).

The boy was ready to speak and unafraid to reveal the truth. We too must be ready and unafraid to be useful instruments in God’s hands and perhaps “save a soul from death” (James 5:20).

**Let him know that he who turns a sinner
from the error of his way will save a soul
from death and cover a multitude of sins.**

James 5:20

—Charles Whitaker

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

Jesus and “the Spirits in Prison”

“ . . . He went and preached to the spirits in prison . . . ”
—I Peter 3:19

According to Scripture, human history covers a period of about six thousand years. The first epoch of mankind lasted less than two thousand years, punctuated at its end by the worst global disaster humanity has ever seen, the Noachian Flood. Somewhat more than two thousand years of history ensued before the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, and since then, about two thousand years have elapsed. It takes only moderate intellect to determine that the gospel of the Kingdom of God, as delineated by Christ Himself, has been preached only to the last third of human history. Certainly, salvation in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12) has been available only since His crucifixion nearly two millennia ago.

While the greater part of humanity has lived during the last third of its history, millions—even billions—of individuals lived before Jesus, before the gospel, before our Creator’s inestimable act of self-sacrifice for us. This does not even consider the many millions or billions *since* that time who never heard Jesus’ name or the gospel preached or God’s offer of salvation and eternal life. For any reasonable, concerned individual, this fact generates disturbing questions: Did God withhold the opportunity for salvation from them? Are these people lost? Is God fair?

These are thorny questions even for Christian theologians. Most of them, subscribing to a heaven/hell ideology, can muster no satisfactory answer to this dilemma—essentially condemning untold billions to hellfire or some shadowy Hades. Some of them, realizing that such callousness is hardly the kind of attitude one would expect from a God of love, advance highly creative theories of salvation-after-the-fact for the “lost” dead.

For these latter scholars, I Peter 3:18-22, a very difficult passage, answers the question of how God deals with some of those who never heard the gospel or had a chance for salvation:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. There is also an antitype which now saves us, namely baptism (not the removal of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God), through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and power having been made subject to Him.

However, under close scrutiny, this passage does not support these theologians' argument.

Dead Is Dead

The context of Peter's thought actually runs through I Peter 4:6, as Bibles that split passages into paragraphs show. The apostle is speaking about the efficacy of Christ's suffering and death in making possible a relationship between God and human beings. His conclusion, beginning in I Peter 4:1-2, is that, since Christ suffered so much to bring this about, Christians should respond by "ceas[ing] from sin" and living "for the will of God."

This means, of course, that in doing so, we no longer live as we used to, like the "Gentiles," like the world (verse 3). Seeing this, our friends who are still in the world wonder why our lives have changed so drastically, and they are likely to malign us for it (verse 4). But we need not worry because God, the just Judge, will bring them into account for their abuses of us (verse 5). In verse 6, he winds up his discussion by providing a general example to give us hope in this regard. He explains that the gospel had been preached in the past to people who are now dead, and even though their contemporaries may have judged them worthy to suffer persecution and death, God, conversely, has judged them worthy of eternal life. He implies that God would do the same for us.

Having read what Peter writes in I Peter 3:19, many have assumed that the "dead" in I Peter 4:6 are the souls of dead people who are "lost" in terms of salvation. However, this is not the case—in fact, the only real connection between "the spirits in prison" and "those who are dead" is that they appear in the same paragraph! In taking the latter verse apart and seeing it in the flow of the apostle's thought, one realizes that the "dead" are individuals who actually heard the gospel while they were alive, embraced it, and suffered and died for it, whom God accounted worthy of eternal life. Therefore, since they are not the lost dead, I Peter 4:6 is not a clarification of I Peter 3:19 and "the spirits in prison," as is often supposed. To whom, then, did Jesus preach in I Peter 3:19?

One significant, foundational point must be made before proceeding any further: Jesus could *not* have preached to anyone, dead or alive, while His dead body lay in the tomb. Why? Because He was dead! If He was not dead during those "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" (Matthew 12:40), then His sacrifice for the sins of humanity was in vain!

Scripture says that, when Jesus died on the cross, like all men His "spirit [returned] to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7; see Matthew 27:50; Luke 23:46; John 19:30). The spirit of a human is not conscious in death, for Solomon tells us plainly that "the dead know nothing" (Ecclesiastes 9:5). Thus, the spirit of a dead person *cannot do anything*: "for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going" (verse 10). As the psalmist writes, when a man dies, "[h]is spirit departs, he returns to his earth; in that very day his plans [thoughts, KJV] perish" (Psalm 146:4; see also Job 14:20-21; Psalm 104:29).

Jesus, in order to taste death like every man (Hebrews 2:9), had to die just as every

man does. He was completely dead for three days and three nights; He was without life and consciousness both in body and in spirit. He could do no preaching to anyone, much less “to the spirits in prison,” whoever they are.

“Spirits in Prison”

As mentioned before, this passage in I Peter 3, particularly verses 19-20, is quite difficult to translate from Greek to English. This is so because each of the nine Greek words in verse 19 can be translated in various shades of meaning, making interpretation tricky. We probably do best by translating them in their most basic meanings, thus: “in which also He went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison . . .” (author’s paraphrase).

The “which” (“whom” in NKJV) in verse 19 probably refers back to “Spirit,” its closest antecedent, in verse 18, suggesting that Jesus was no longer in the flesh but by this time had been changed into spirit. This follows the historical chain of events in order from the preceding verse: He suffered, died, was resurrected, and was thus changed to spirit, leading to the next key words, “He went.”

What happened next in the gospel record after His resurrection to spirit? What did Jesus do after arising from the dead? Some might suggest that He revealed Himself to His disciples, which He did, but not by any stretch of meaning could it be described as going and proclaiming to imprisoned spirits! No, John tells us through the words of Jesus Himself to Mary Magdalene what the next momentous occurrence was: “[G]o to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God’” (John 20:17). When Jesus “went,” He ascended in glory to the right hand of the Father in heaven!

At this point, we will skip to the phrase “spirits in prison.” First, let us note that the Bible does not refer to human beings who have died as being imprisoned in any way, not even those who have rebelled against and rejected God. They may be said to be “destroyed” or “killed” or “cut off” or sent to “Sheol,” which is a pit or grave, but they are never imprisoned. As we saw, humans who die return to the dust of which they are made (see also Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

However, the Bible speaks in several places about spirit beings—angels or demons—being imprisoned (see II Peter 2:4-5, where Peter again refers to Noah’s time; Jude 6; and Revelation 20:1-3, 7). Rebellious angels, unlike mortal humans, must be imprisoned because angels or demons, being composed of spirit, do not die as humans do. The “angels who sinned,” Peter and Jude say, were cast down to *Tartarus* (“a place of restraint,” a prison) where they are bound until God judges them. This Tartarus, this “hell” where the demons are restrained, is none other than their “first estate,” their “proper domain,” earth (see Ezekiel 28:17; Revelation 12:7-9)!

Second, Peter’s use of “spirits” is consistent with its use in the gospels (see, for instance, Matthew 8:16; 12:45; Mark 3:11; 5:13; 6:7; Luke 11:26; etc.). In the gospels, “spirits” consistently denotes “evil spirits,” “demons,” “wicked spirits.” It is highly likely that Peter refers to demons in I Peter 3:19.

This is confirmed by the first phrase of verse 20, “who formerly were disobedient” (NKJV) or “who disobeyed long ago” (New International Version, [NIV]). Peter is speaking of a time in deep antiquity, a time before the Flood. Perhaps he does not intend us to think of Satan’s original sin of rebellion against God (Isaiah 14; Ezekiel 28), although it may be included, but specifically of the demons’ corruption of mankind between the Creation and the Flood.

This would explain his time marker in the next phrase, “when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built” (NIV). In Satan’s sin, only the demons themselves were affected, but when they corrupted mankind, human beings who were potential sons of God were affected. Once men and women began sinning under the influence of Satan and his demon horde, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ became necessary.

Peter's point, then, is that, though the wicked spirits seemed to be so successful in corrupting mankind, God patiently waited during Noah's 120-year ministry to save only eight people by bringing them through the Flood, delivering them through a kind of baptism. The demons had failed to destroy mankind. So also, by having Jesus crucified, the demons thought again they had won, but through the resurrection, Jesus had the victory instead. Baptism is a type of this same victory, as it is a symbolic death of the old, wicked man and of his resurrection to newness of life (see Romans 6:4).

Victory!

This brings us back to the word in I Peter 3:19 that we skipped: "proclaimed" (or in many Bibles, "preached"). Most objective commentaries will note that this word in the Greek (*ekḗruxen* from *kḗrússō*) means in general "to be a herald," "to proclaim," "to announce," "to publish," "to preach." Although it can be used as such, it does not necessarily mean "to preach the gospel to" or "to preach salvation to." Because Peter does not specify what Jesus "proclaimed" or "announced," to assume the preaching of the gospel is not warranted. The only clue we have of what He proclaimed appears in the immediate context: that He was "made alive by the Spirit."

If this is the case, verse 19 says simply that, after Jesus was resurrected, He ascended to heaven, proclaiming to the imprisoned evil spirits that He lived! The demons, once again, had failed!

Verse 22 backs this interpretation: "who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers having been made subject to him." This agrees with many scriptures that speak of His exaltation over all things, for instance, Philippians 2:9-10: "Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth." Jesus' ascension to the throne of God proclaimed His victory over death and over Satan and his demons.

We can now return, then, to the original, theological opinion that this passage explains the fate of the lost of humanity. It actually does, just not in the way most understand it. Jesus, while dead Himself, did not bring the souls of the dead to salvation through preaching to them personally in some kind of nether world. Such a scenario is theologically ridiculous.

However, His resurrection did make salvation possible for the "lost" dead. By living again, He has broken the grip of death over mankind (see I Corinthians 15:20-22, 55-57; Hebrews 2:14-17). As Paul says in I Corinthians 15, each category of individual will be resurrected in a specific order: first Christ, then His saints at His coming (verse 23), then "the rest of the dead" (Revelation 20:5, 11-13), and lastly, the incorrigible wicked to the second death (Revelation 20:14-15). The "lost" of humanity will rise as "the rest of the dead" in the Great White Throne Judgment, and have the opportunity to hear and to accept or reject the good news of salvation. This will be their first opportunity to receive God's calling, an opportunity that God will extend to every member of humanity.

God is not callous by any means. Perhaps the best known of all Bible verses asserts this clearly: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). He will make sure that *every* human being has an opportunity to hear the gospel and have the choice to enter His Kingdom. God's victory over death and over Satan, won through His resurrection of the sinless Jesus Christ, will eventually be proclaimed to all people from all ages. That is a victory worth shouting about!

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

personal *Is the Christian Required To Do Works?*

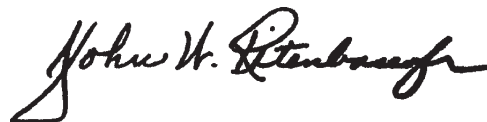
(continued from page 8)

A major difference between the two is that the righteousness imputed for justification is Christ's, not ours except by imputation. God grants it to us or accounts it to us for Christ's sake in a manner analogous to a legal procedure. Conversely, sanctification is actually the process of making a person inwardly righteous through experiencing life within a relationship with God.

The imputed righteousness of justification is as perfect as it ever will be; it never increases nor diminishes because that righteousness is Christ's. The righteousness of sanctification, however, is mingled with our many infirmities and imperfections.

In justification, our works have no part at all, but in sanctification, our works are of vast importance, requiring much sacrifice, striving, labor, prayer, and fighting to meet and conquer sin. Justification opens the door into God's presence and the Kingdom of God; sanctification makes us fit to dwell there. We will consider this more fully next time.

In Christian love,



Do You Feel Lucky?

(continued from page 10)

We do not need a rabbit's foot in our pockets. It will not bring us luck. It did not bring the rabbit much luck, did it? We should not be crossing our fingers "for luck," which is pagan in origin anyway. Many times, in talking to someone in the world, I find myself saying, "Good luck!" to him or her. I have determined to eradicate that phrase because, as we have seen, it is really not appropriate. Instead, we should say, "Do your best!" "I hope things go well!" or maybe, "*Vaya con dios!*"

Three Tips

In the course of his interview, Richard Wiseman offered advice on how to get lucky in life. He would have done better to give tips on how to live, not a lucky life, but a prosperous life. Here are three:

In Proverbs 6:6-8, we have the famous admonition, "Go to the ant, you sluggard! Consider her ways and be wise, which, having no captain [leader], overseer or ruler, provides her supplies in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest." Proverbs 22:3-5 adds

A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself, but the simple pass on, and are punished. By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches and honor and life. Thorns and snares are in the way of the perverse; he who guards his soul will be far from them.

First, then, we *plan*, which defined in its verb form means to "think out, prepare in advance; arrange, contemplate, design, organize, outline." Somewhat self-explanatory, this does not mean one should fund his retirement years with lottery tickets, or one should skip getting an education because his parents will leave him their estate. The ant has no one telling it what to do, yet it works to provide its needs by planning, laying up supplies for the future.

Second, along with our plan, we must have *prudence*. "A prudent man foresees evil and hides himself [he avoids the evil], but the simple pass on and are punished." *Prudent* means "wise, sensible in action and thought, careful, cautious, circumspect, discerning, vigilant, wary." To "foresee evil" means all of these things—that one is careful, cautious, discerning, vigilant, and wary. A prudent person is always watching. One of Wiseman's points is to be open to chance opportunities. This does not mean leaving a good job in the factory to be a clown in the circus, but rather that a person prudently considers matters as they arise and makes good decisions concerning them. For a very few, working for the circus might be a prudent career move, yet for most of us, it is not.

Third, we must never forget *providence*, which is "care or preparation in advance; foresight, prudent management." So far, this definition encapsulates the first two points of advice. However, it is also "care and control exercised by a deity," and in our case, the deity is God. All our planning and all our prudence will be for naught if God is not behind it. As *The Amplified Bible* renders Proverbs 22:4, "The reward of humility and the reverent and the worshipful fear of the Lord is riches and honor and life."

We do our part, and God will do His part. Albert Einstein reportedly said, "God does not play dice with the universe." We might add: God does not play dice with His people either. We are all given a space in time in which to live our lives. How will we approach it? We can plan, be prudent, revere God, and be rewarded with prosperous lives—not necessarily with money, but with happiness, health, family, and a true, godly reason for living. On the other hand, we can avoid black cats, leaning ladders, broken mirrors, and spilled salt. We can cross our fingers, knock on wood, carry an acorn, hang a horseshoe over our doors, and look to luck.

Do you feel lucky? Or do you feel blessed?

—Mike Ford

Global Financial Instability

Forecasting the financial future is not unlike predicting the weather on any given day. While meteorologists are notorious for inaccurately predicting both sun and rain, some weather trends and generalities are still pretty safe bets. Likewise, while markets continue to vacillate, it is still possible to catch glimpses of when summer growth will occur, when a winter slowdown will happen, or even when cataclysm is bearing down on us. A flurry of recent financial headlines indicates a certain shakiness in the global system:

- *The Telegraph* on May 15, 2006, reported, "Analysts said there were now clear signs that monetary tightening by the world's central banks was starting to crimp growth. Lombard Street Research warned the US was now heading into outright recession, with China also facing a hard landing. . . . It raised the risk of 'an impending financial crisis' caused by excess credit and leverage across the global economy." (Ambrose Evans-Pritchard, "Markets braced for the worst")

- *The Sunday Times* of London on May 21, 2006, noted, "Conditions in the financial markets are eerily similar to those that precipitated the 'Black Monday' stock market crash of October 1987. . . . A report by Barclays Capital says the run-up to the 1987 crash was [characterized] by a widening US current-account deficit, weak dollar, fears of rising inflation, a fading boom in American house prices, and the appointment of a new chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. All have been happening in recent months. . . ." (David Smith, "Markets 'are like 1987 crash'")

- In the one-month period from May 12 through June 12, 2006, the Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 588 points (5.2%). At the same time, the NASDAQ Composite lost 152 points (6.8%).

- According to the *Associated Press* on June 13, 2006, "worries over the outlook for U.S. interest rates sent global markets tumbling again on Tuesday, with the Japanese stock market plunging more than 4 percent, its biggest one-day loss in two years. In Bombay, Indian shares plummeted 4.5 percent to their lowest point this year." ("Global Markets Plunge on Fed Worries")

While these facts may mean little more than an unusually chilly day in late June, Stratfor's June 8, 2006, "Global Market Brief" highlights three areas where changes—corrections—seem imminent.

First, good news: Stratfor predicts oil prices will probably break. While both high demand and maximized productivity are unchanged, other factors are beginning to taper off. For example, a considerable amount of the price of oil is caused by "premiums"—fears of instability or insecurity that make traders nervous. Any time something untoward happens in

a major oil-producing country, the oil price rises, even though production costs remain stable.

While certain premiums remain—the militant threat in Nigeria, the incendiary rhetoric of the Venezuelan president, the war on terror, and especially the war in Iraq—the premium of Iran's nuclear ambitions may be at a breaking point. Stratfor has long argued that Iran's nuclear project is essentially only a lever in its back-channel negotiations with the U.S. over Iraq's future, and particularly its ability to threaten Iran. With the killing of Iraqi jihadist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and the near-simultaneous ratification of the proposed Iraqi government, it appears that most of the interested parties there—including Iran—are on board, diminishing the need for hyped fear.

As tensions ebb, the various premiums will lose their potency, and the oil price should descend. As Stratfor puts it, "With refining capacity slim and with the beginning of hurricane season, the United States may not be able to look forward to a gasoline price crash, but a crude price reduction in some (large) form seems long overdue."

Second, as pointed out in "The Red Dragon: Rising or Falling?" (*Forerunner*, December 2005), the Chinese behemoth appears close to receiving a dose of fiscal reality. China's state-owned banking system has hundreds of billions of dollars in "non-performing loans"—loans given out for political or social reasons rather than economic ones, which will never be paid back. International financial institutions such as Fitch, Standard & Poor's, McKinsey Global Institute, and Ernst & Young all released analyses in May highlighting the enormous bad-loan bubble, and the markets are taking notice.

We should not let the conventional wisdom about China's economy fool us. Stratfor observes, "Size and growth are but two measures of an economy—or of a business. [But they] do not tell you how well it is doing." (Incidentally, this is also true of the U.S. economy.) China's vast, overheated economy is headed for a correction, and many nations will suffer from its contraction.

Finally, Stratfor calls Europe the "weirdest market of all." European markets have seen little or no growth for the past 16 years, and even their financial strongman—Germany—has underperformed over the last year. Inflation across the board is above the maximum level allowed by the EU's treaty. On top of this, an interest rate hike on June 8 will only slow the economy further. Amazingly, in spite of the data, European surveys show consumer and business confidence is on the rise, resulting in assertions that European economies are experiencing a boom. Stratfor views this "irrational exuberance" as a dead-giveaway that the global economy is in a nosedive.

Market reports and forecasts are a dime-a-dozen these days, and this analysis is no exception. While it is impossible to say exactly what the economy may do or when—globally or locally—what is apparent is economic volatility, and potentially, a multitude of economic woes in the near-term.

—David C. Grabbe

The Parables of Matthew 13

Part Eight: The Parable of the Dragnet

In the fourth pair of the parables of Matthew 13, Jesus continues to instruct His disciples apart from the general multitude to which He had spoken earlier. The seventh parable in the chapter, the Parable of the Dragnet (verse 47) teaches that in the professing church, the good and evil who intermingle on earth will be completely separated “at the end of the age.” This set time of separation will be, for the good, a time of rejoicing in a bright, eternal future, but for the evil, it will be a time of mourning before eternal oblivion.

In Matthew 4:18-20, Jesus says to Peter and Andrew, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men,” providing a partial interpretation of this parable. When Jesus Christ later made the twelve disciples fishers of men, they went out and brought in “catches” of converts. Thus, the church, composed of the “called,” are caught in God’s net, which His servants draw in.

Peter, Andrew, James, and John had been fishermen prior to their calling, so to them, the idea of the dragnet was a familiar and vivid picture. Their work entailed using a net—a dragnet—of great length, weighted by lead and designed to sweep the bottom of the sea, gathering fish in masses. Two boats would drag this net between them, sweeping a section of the Sea of Galilee, after which the sailors would haul the net to shore. There, the fishermen would go through the entire net, keeping the good fish but burning the substandard ones to avoid catching them again later.

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1. What does the sea represent? The fish? Matthew 13:47.

COMMENT: The symbol of “the sea” is similar to that seen in the beasts rising out of the sea and out of the earth (Revelation 13:1, 11). It designates origination, representing the realm of the earth. Christ’s origin is the realm of heaven, but the beasts, part of a corrupt system, come from the sea and the earth. The sea, a body of water, symbolizes “peoples, multitudes, nations, and tongues” (Revelation 17:15).

In the parable, when the fish are caught in a net thrown in the sea, Jesus signifies that members of His church are “the called” out of the world (Romans 1:5-6; 8:28). The dragnet gathers some of every kind; God’s net catches fish without partiality to age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, wealth, intelligence, language, beauty, and so forth. His interest is in developing our character and whether He can work with us (Romans 2:11; 5:8; 9:18, 21).

2. Is the judgment of the bad fish just? What is this parable’s focus? Matthew 13:48-50.

COMMENT: Jesus tells us that the bad fish are thrown into the fire. John the Baptist says this in a slightly different way in Matthew 3:12: “[Jesus] will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.” This principle appears somewhat differently in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matthew 25:31-46): Christ is Judge, and He sets the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left. He judges that the sheep can enter eternal life, while the goats receive the destructive judgment of fire.

Although a final judgment is coming for the world, the church is now under God’s judgment (1 Peter 4:17; Revelation 11:1-2). Not only is the sentence coming, but our conduct and growth are also currently being judged—Christ is evaluating whether we meet His high standards. Ultimately, everyone is judged the same way, according to the same standard, by the same criteria. The “bad fish” among us are not ours to judge, but Jesus, the righteous Judge, has promised to judge with equity (Psalm 98:9).

Matthew 13:50 says they are thrown “into the furnace of fire.” A similar thing occurs in the Parable of the Tares: At the end of the age, the tares will be gathered and thrown into the furnace (verses 30, 41-42). The emphasis in the Parable of the Tares is on the wicked and their evil works and their subsequent judgment. However, in the Parable of the Dragnet, instead of highlighting the wickedness, Jesus focuses on *the process of judgment*, not necessarily on condemning evildoers. Some people are condemned for doing wicked things, but others are saved and rewarded for doing the good works assigned to them. God’s calling is first impartial, and then His judgment is absolutely fair. The wicked will get only what they deserve.

3. By what standard does Christ judge? Same verses.

COMMENT: God’s “catch” is the church, a chosen cross section of the entire world; He casts a wide net. However, once those He calls accept Jesus Christ, God does show Himself partial to the “good fish”—those who love Him, obey Him, serve others, grow, and produce spiritual fruit. In the process of salvation, God judges whether we are good, useable fish or substandard fish fit only for the fire. He judges us according to how we measure up against His standard of righteousness, “the perfect man, . . . the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13). God throws His net into the world and drags us in, and if we are unwilling to comply with His holy standard, our eternal judgment will be to be discarded in the fire.

Presently, the church’s function is not judicial but declarative. On the one hand, the church is responsible to warn sinners of the dire consequences of sin and of the time of God’s judgment coming upon all humanity. On the other hand, we are to witness of God’s way of life, as well as to proclaim the return of Christ’s return and the establishment of God’s wonderful, benevolent government here on earth. That is good news!