

## Facing Times Of Stress: Hopeless Regrets

Spiritual Depression

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So often today's Christians give the impression that they are dejected and depressed. Certainly, some would almost give the impression that to become a Christian means you face many problems that never worried you before. So, looking at things superficially the man of the world comes to the conclusion that you find happier people outside the church than inside the church.

The worldly person is quite wrong, of course, but we must recognize that some of us have to plead guilty to the charge that far too often, because we suffer from a spiritual depression, we often misrepresent God's way of life and His soon coming Kingdom.

However, the fact is that the life of a Christian is in many ways much harder than the life of the unbeliever because of the God-given (or allowed) special trials and discipline that we receive. Add to that the overcoming that is required of the Christian, and you have a life characterized by perseverance—resistance against Satan, the world, and our own human nature.

Now all this stress and depression is due to the fact that we are confronted by a very powerful adversary. When we become a Christian, we become subjected to the most subtle and powerful assaults by the one described in the Bible as, "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now rules in the children of disobedience, the god of this world," and "Satan the Devil."

And as we consider the way in which Satan is able to come to us and to attack us, and the subtle way in which he deludes and leads us astray without our realizing it at all, we begin to understand why so many fail in resisting the wiles of the Devil.

And, of course, he is very subtle and very dangerous when he comes as 'an angel of light' and as a would-be friend of the church, and as one who is interested in counterfeiting the gospel and its propagation.

In view of this we must prepare ourselves for him and for such attacks; and the way to do that is to study the Scriptures. That is where we are given an insight into his methods.

**I Peter 5:8-10** Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks

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about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour. Resist him, steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.

But the tragedy is that so many are ignorant of his devices that they do not really believe in his existence, and even those who do, fail to remember that he is always there, and that he can appear in many subtle forms.

As we look objectively at what he does to us, we cannot but be amazed at our unthinkable foolishness at times. As we look at facing times of stress and the spiritual depression that often comes out of it, we scratch our heads and ask, "How could a Christian have fallen into that?"

It all seems so plain and obvious, yet we are all constantly falling into the same snare. That is due to the subtlety of Satan's methods. He puts things to us in such an attractive manner that we find that we have fallen almost before we realize that anything has happened at all. There is an effective way to deal with all this, and that is to study his methods and to study the various teachings of the Scripture itself with regard to the condition of spiritual depression.

Consider the case of other people who are crippled in the present as the result of looking back into the past, not to some particular sin, but to the fact that they spent so much time outside the church and were so late in being baptized, or that they have made very little effort while in the church.

This is a common cause of spiritual depression—Hopeless regrets. These people are depressed by the fact that they wasted so much time, wasted so many long years, and that they have been so slow to answer God's call to repent and to overcome sin. They are always regretting the fact that they have missed so many opportunities to be doing good and helping others, and other opportunities of service. Missed opportunities!

Or, they may put it in terms of what they might have attained to by now—if only. If only—that is their cry. But they did not believe; and looking back at the years spent out in the world not understanding these things, they are full of regrets for what they might have been, for how they might have grown in grace, and for the point at which they would have arrived now.

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They look back in that way to the past and they regret it and complain about it; they look back at the joys they might have had, the years of happy joyful experiences they might have had. But it is too late; the opportunities have gone. Why were they so foolish? How could they have been so blind? Why were they so slow? They heard God's truth. They read church articles and booklets. They even felt something at a certain point, but nothing came of it and the opportunity was allowed to go. Now at long last they understand and are obsessed by the thought—"if only".

This is a very common condition, and it accounts for a state of spiritual depression in large numbers of people. How do we deal with this? Granted, it is perfectly right for such a person to regret the fact that they have been so slow to believe. However, it is quite wrong to be miserable about it. You cannot look back across your past life without seeing things to regret. That is as it should be; but it is right there that the subtlety of this condition comes in, and we cross that fine line of distinction that lies between a legitimate regret and a wrong condition of misery and dejection.

The Christian life is a very finely balanced life. That is one of its most striking features. It has been compared to a man walking on a knife-edge with the possibility of easily falling on either side. All along we have to draw subtle distinctions between a legitimate regret and a wrong condition of gloominess and despair.

### Avoiding Regret

How, then, do we avoid being miserable? We will consider this in terms of what the apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 15 about himself:

**I Corinthians 15:1-10** Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the

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grace of God which was with me.

This is a good illustration of what Christ taught in the parable of Matthew 20 regarding the laborers in the vineyard who were hired at different hours of the day, in which some of them not until the eleventh hour. We will look at it from the perspective of the people who were hired at the eleventh hour.

But before we come to the specific dealing with the matter in terms of Scripture, let us consider it in a more general way. There are certain principles of common sense and general wisdom that need to be applied to this condition. There are some people who seem to think that it is wrong for a Christian ever to use common sense. They seem to think that they must always do everything in an exclusively spiritual manner. But that is not necessarily scriptural.

The Christian is in no respect inferior to the unbeliever; he is always superior in general wisdom. The Christian not only does everything that the unbeliever does in mental and physical action, he can do even more. Christians are people who are to apply common sense to situations, and it is right and legitimate that they do this. If you can conquer Satan at that level, conquer him at that level. It does not matter at what level you conquer Satan as long as you conquer him with God's help. If you can defeat him and get rid of him by using common sense and ordinary wisdom, do so. It is perfectly right and legitimate for the Christian to do that.

I am saying all this because people are often confused about this matter, and they are spending their time in prayer about a matter instead of doing something that is perfectly obvious from the standpoint of common sense.

Let me explain what I mean with the first principle from the perspective of common sense and human wisdom. To be miserable in the present because of some failure in the past is a sheer waste of time and energy. That is obvious. That is common sense. The past cannot be lived again, so you can do nothing about it. You can sit down and be miserable, and you can go round and round in circles of regret for the rest of your life, but it will make no difference to what you have done. Now that is common sense and it does not need special Christian revelation to demonstrate it. The world in its wisdom tells us it is no use crying over spilt milk.

Why would a Christian be more foolish than anybody else? Why would we not apply natural common sense and human wisdom to a situation? But that is what many people fail to do. The result is that they are wasting their time and energy in hopeless regrets

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about things which they cannot change or undo—a purely foolish and irrational thing to do, even from the mundane standard of common sense.

Let us lay this down as a principle. We must never worry about anything that cannot be affected or changed by us. It is a waste of energy and a waste of time. If you can do nothing about a situation, stop thinking about it; never again look back at it. If you do, it is Satan defeating you. Vague useless regrets must be dismissed as irrational. Stop dwelling on them!

But let us go further. The second principle from the perspective of common sense and human wisdom is that to dwell on the past simply causes failure in the present. While you are sitting down and regretting the past and regretting all the things you have not done, you are crippling yourself and preventing yourself from working in the present.

Christianity is common sense and much more—but it includes common sense. Christ said that the children of this world are more clever in their generation than the children of light.

**Luke 16:7-11** Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.' So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light. "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home. He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much. Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?

The world from its perspective is perfectly right in this matter. Jesus commended the unjust steward for being wise as a serpent. But that is not the balance needed by the sons of light. Even more importantly, we must be harmless as doves as well.

**Matthew 10:16** "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves.

It is always wrong to mortgage the present by the past, it is always wrong to allow the past to act as a brake upon the present. Let the dead (the past in this case) bury its

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dead. There is nothing that is more reprehensible, judged by common opinions of thought, than to allow anything that belongs to the past to cause you to be a failure in the present. And this morbid concern about the past does so.

The people I am describing are failing in the present. Instead of living in the present and doing something, they do nothing in the present.

In preparation for Passover we have an opportunity that we can use as a catalyst to overcome any hopeless regrets we may have. Our sins had separated us from God and we had the death penalty hanging over us. But, Jesus Christ's sacrifice does not redeem us from the death penalty until we repent of breaking God's law, turn from sin, and accept Jesus Christ as our Savior. Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this than to sacrifice his life for his friends." Christ's sacrifice is to us the example of what it takes—to have, or to be given the quality of life that will be worth living eternally.

The third principle from the perspective of common sense and human wisdom is that if you really believe what you say about the past, if you really do regret the fact that you have wasted so much time in the past, the thing to do is to make up for it in the present. Is that not just common sense? There is the person who comes in utterly dejected and saying, "If only . . ." "Oh, the time I've wasted!" So what do we say to him? "Are you making up for that lost time? Why are you wasting this energy in telling me about the past which you can't undo? Why don't you put your energy into the present?"

This spiritually depressed condition has to be dealt with sternly. And the last thing to do with such people is to sympathize with them. If you are suffering from this condition, get a hold of yourself and examine yourself from an ordinary common sense point of view, in addition to looking for the spiritual problem.

But more importantly than that, become spiritually awakened through Bible study, prayer, and fasting if necessary; Christ will give you light, so that you can walk vigilantly in the spirit.

**Ephesians 5:8-15** For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." See then that

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you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise.

If you are in a spiritually depressed condition, you are behaving like a fool, you are being irrational, and you are wasting your time and energy. If you regret a wasted past, make up for it in the present. Think and live today. That is what Paul did.

In effect, Paul says, "I've wasted a lot of time; others have gone ahead of me." But, he is able to go on and to add, "I worked harder than they all; however it's not me who should get the credit, but God who by His grace was with me."

It has been rightly said that God helps those who help themselves. That is the way of dealing with this thing from the perspective of common sense and of ordinary human wisdom. That is sufficient to solve many problems, nevertheless let us go beyond that.

The Christian is never less than the unbeliever; he is always more. He should have all the common sense and wisdom of the unbeliever, but he has something more in addition. Here we come to the statement of the apostle Paul and to Jesus Christ's teaching in the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard found in Matthew 20.

Let us see what the apostle Paul has to say. Paul has been giving an account of the resurrection appearances. His immediate concern is about that doctrine, but this is how he writes in I Corinthians 15:8, "Then last of all He was seen by me also."

The apostle Paul undoubtedly regretted the fact that he had come into the Christian life so late. What does he mean when he says last of all? He means that he was the last of the apostles to see the risen Christ. They had all seen Him in different ways together. Paul was not with them then; he was a blasphemer and a persecutor at that time. So last of all means the last of the apostles. But not only was he the last one of the apostles, he was literally the last person of all persons to see the risen Christ.

No one has ever seen the risen Christ with his naked eyes since the apostle Paul saw Him on the road to Damascus. He showed Himself to over 500 brethren at once. We do not even know their names, but He did show Himself to them and to these various witnesses that are recorded.

But the very last person of all to see Him was Saul of Tarsus. What happened on the road to Damascus was not that Paul had a vision, but he literally saw Jesus Christ alive after His resurrection. And that is what he says in I Corinthians 15:8, "Last of all He was seen by me."

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That is what made him an apostle, that he was a witness to the fact of the resurrection. But the thing he is emphasizing is this, that he was the very last of all. And not satisfied with that, he says in verse 8, "Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time."

There was something untimely about his spiritual calling. He was not like the others. The others had listened to Christ's teaching. They had been with Him all along. They had been at the crucifixion. They had seen Him buried. They had been with Him for forty days after the resurrection. They had been with Him at the Ascension. They were with Him from the beginning and right through to the end.

But Paul, on the contrary, had had a kind of untimely spiritual calling and election; he came, in some odd, strange way last of all. That is what he says about himself. And, of course, he could only think of that with regret. He should have been in at the beginning, he had had the facilities, he had had the opportunities; but he had hated Christ and His teachings.

**Acts 26:9-11** "Indeed, I [Saul] thought I must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. This I also did in Jerusalem, and many of the saints I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in every synagogue and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities.

Saul regarded Jesus as a blasphemer, and tried to exterminate His followers individually and His church as a whole. There, Saul was outside, but all the others were in. But, last of all, and in this strange way, he came in.

How easy it could have been for him to have spent the rest of his life in hopeless regrets about the past! He said, "Last of all He was seen by me, though I am the least of the apostles because I persecuted the church." It was all true; and he bitterly regretted it; but that did not paralyze Paul. He did not spend the rest of his life sitting in a corner and saying, "I'm the last to come in. Why did I do that? How could I have rejected Christ?"

That is what the people suffering from spiritual depression do. But Paul did not. What struck him, upon God's calling of Him, was the awesome grace that brought him in at all. And so he entered into the new life with tremendous zeal, and though he was last of all, yet, in a sense, he became the first.

## Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

Let us take this teaching and look at it in the light of the Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard found in Matthew 20, because they both say the same thing.

The parable of Matthew 20:1-16 warns against thinking that God is unfair, that other people have been given more than we have been given. God is completely just and fair in everything He does; therefore, we are obligated to be content with what He has given us. And, we must not get in His way, as He uses us to carry out His will.

In this parable, we are introduced to the landowner, who is Christ Himself. Before sunrise He is ready for work, He is always working. People may waste time during the day by being idle, but the landowner is never found standing idle, and wherever He can find those who are willing to work diligently in His vineyard, He hires them. At various hours of our day we can begin to work for Him, and demanding the longest day of service we can render, He promises us wages.

**Matthew 20:1-2** "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. Now when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard.

A denarius was a typical day's wage for a laborer when Jesus gave this parable. The workday was typically divided into four 3-hour increments, running from approximately 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Therefore, the eleventh hour was about 5:00 p.m., near the end of the workday.

**Matthew 20:3-10** And he went out about the third hour and saw others standing idle in the marketplace, and said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right I will give you.' So they went. Again he went out about the sixth and the ninth hour, and did likewise. And about the eleventh hour he went out and found others standing idle, and said to them, 'Why have you been standing here idle all day?' They said to him, 'Because no one hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and whatever is right you will receive.' So when evening had come, the owner of the vineyard said to his steward, 'Call the laborers and give them their wages, beginning with the last to the first.' And when those came who were hired about the eleventh hour, they each received a denarius. But when the first came, they supposed that they would receive more; and they likewise

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received each a denarius.

These workers are desperate enough to continue waiting for work. Each of them received a denarius. Surprisingly, the last laborers to be hired are paid a complete denarius, the same as those who had worked all day.

**Matthew 20:11-13** And when they had received it, they complained against the landowner, saying, 'These last men have worked only one hour, and you made them equal to us who have borne the burden and the heat of the day.' But he answered one of them and said, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong. Did you not agree with me for a denarius?

The landowner (picturing Christ) says, 'Friend, I'm doing you no wrong.' The landowner addresses the laborer gently, explaining the fairness of his actions. Then, he says to the one worker, 'Didn't you agree?' In the original Greek this is literally, 'Is your eye evil?' The laborer failed to be thankful for his own wage because he was blinded by his self-interest and lack of compassion for his fellow workers.

**Matthew 20:14-16** Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?' So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

This parable teaches that if we start at the eleventh hour we will receive more than we ever hoped or deserved. Starting under a fearful disadvantage, 11/12ths of the day gone, yet we can receive the same thing—salvation—as those who started at sunrise.

The parable names the fact that often those repenting late may equal or overtake those who started long before in goodness and service. It is not necessarily the length of service that tells, but the quality of it.

Discontentment, however, seems to be the essential difficulty in the parable. The discontentment of those who had labored long but received no more wages than those who started late seems incompatible with rendering service.

The landowner, being just, knows what each laborer of His is worth, and therefore discontent at His rewards for service is unwarranted. All who enter His service must

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A disciple of Jesus must not measure his or her worth by comparing it with the accomplishments and sacrifices of others, but should focus on serving from a heart of gratitude in response to God's grace.

When it comes to the distribution of rewards for service, there will be the manifestation of three great principles: Justice, sovereignty, and grace.

As the landowner, He promises that you will receive whatever is just. As His laborers we are guaranteed a full and just remuneration for our service whether long or brief. Each will receive the due recompense of the reward.

As the Owner of the vineyard, He claims the sovereign right to do what He wills in His own affairs. It is not for us to question His choice of laborers, nor their respective reward. Because of who and what He is, He cannot act unfairly.

With our finite understanding we may question His ways. At the end, however, as the interpreter, He will make any seeming inconsistency plain. Until then, we must rest in His Word. We will receive whatever is right.

As the good man of the house, He retains to Himself the privilege, the exercise of His goodness and grace, whatever the abundance of His generosity might be. Sovereignty will not be exercised at the expense of justice and grace.

So then, if the last were first and the first last, and some are chosen to special services while others are chosen to certain privileges, no matter which we are, the divine vineyard requires laborers, not loiterers. We should avoid idleness.

### **What you are**

What matters, if you are a Christian is not what you once were, but what you are. The apostle Paul said that he was not worthy to be called an apostle because he persecuted the church of God, but he goes on to add, "But by the grace of God I am what I am."

What does it matter what we were? You are what you are. What matters is not what you were, but what you are. Certainly there is the past with all its sins, but we are what we are, whatever our past may have been.

What are we? We are forgiven; we are reconciled to God by the blood of His Son. We

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are children of God, adopted into His family, joint-heirs with Christ. And when Satan's influence causes you to become depressed, you should take the approach Paul did, and say like he did in I Corinthians 15,

**I Corinthians 15:10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

The next deduction is that it is not the time of your entry into the church that matters, but the fact that you are *in* the church. That is the thing that matters. It is foolish to mourn the fact that you were not in earlier, and allow that to rob you of the things you might be enjoying now.

It is like a person going to a great sports stadium and discovering that there is a long line. He has arrived somewhat late, but before the important event begins. He arrives at the stadium, but he has to wait a long time; he is about the last to get in.

What would you think of such a person if, having gotten in through the door he simply stands at the door and says, "What a shame I wasn't the first to get in; what a disappointment I wasn't in earlier?" You might laugh at that, and rightly so, but be careful at what you laugh, for you may be laughing at yourself, because that is precisely what you may be doing spiritually. "Oh, that I've left it so late."

Do not get upset at being one of the last ones in; enjoy what it has to offer. What does the time of your entering matter? God has chosen the best time for you. The fact is that you are in, and what you are excited to see and hear is all spread out before you. It is not the time of your entry that matters.

Remember back in Matthew 20, those laborers that were the last to enter the vineyard, came in the eleventh hour, but they were in. That was the thing that counted. They had been taken hold of, they had been employed, and they had been brought in.

It is being in that matters, not when you come in or how you come in. It is not the mode or manner of conversion that matters in this case, what matters is that you are justified, sanctified, and forgiven.

But people will sit down and worry about how they came, the time, the manner, and the method.

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It does not really matter. What matters is that you are in. And, if you are in, rejoice in it.

It is the old man that was out; you are now a new man.

**Colossians 3:8-17** But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Overcoming sin and serving God and His elect should be done from the moment we are called; whether early in life or in our waning years. For this purpose, time is both inconsequential—it does not matter when you were called. And in another sense, not wasting time is urgent—we do not have a lot of time left to overcome the world, Satan, and our own human nature.

## **Self**

But we must go even further. This specific manifestation of spiritual depression is due to the fact that this stressed person is still morbidly and sinfully preoccupied with self. You have to be brutal with this condition of yourself as the real problem.

What is it that he is doing wrong? He is still judging himself instead of leaving judgment to God. He lashes himself metaphorically because he was so late and so long in reacting to the truth, and he goes on condemning himself. He appears to be very humble and full of contrition, but it is a mock modesty, in reality. It is an unbalanced self-concern.

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Paul says the same thing about judging in I Corinthians 4.

**I Corinthians 4:1-5** Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

As Christians we have to leave our judgment to God. He is the Judge and we have no right to waste His time or our own time and energy in condemning ourselves. We must leave the judgment to Him, and get on with the work.

This whole trouble is due to this morbid preoccupation with self in the matter of judgment.

This kind of person comes to us in apparent modesty and says, 'If only I'd come into the church sooner what a lot of work I could have done'. The parable of Jesus Christ about the laborers in the vineyard was designed to demolish that argument.

Part of the trouble with these people is that they are still morbidly preoccupied with themselves, that they have not learned as Christians that they are to deny self and follow Christ and to leave themselves, past, present, and future in His hands. But, why are they morbidly preoccupied with themselves? The answer is that they are not sufficiently occupied with Him. It is our failure to know Him and His ways as we should know them.

### **Christ's Example**

We have come into the spiritual life, so we must stop obsessing over ourselves and focus on and enjoy an intimate relationship with God. What is the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian? Paul says it is that the non-Christian is a man that looks at Christ and God with a veil over his eyes and therefore cannot truly see them. Here is Paul's description of the Christian in this sense:

**II Corinthians 3:18** But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory

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to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

That is the Christian. He spends his time in looking at Christ's example and imitating Him. He is so filled with delight by the sight of Him that he has forgotten himself. When we are more interested in Christ, we are less interested in ourselves.

On two occasions recorded in Matthew 3:17, and Matthew 17:5, God the Father let Christ know that He was pleased with Christ's human life. This must have been of immense comfort and encouragement to Jesus.

How can we receive this comfort and know our efforts please God?

God sent Jesus Christ to not only be a sacrifice for sin, but to be an example for us. It is in Christ's example that we find the standard that determines whether we will become spirit beings in God's family. If we are to be kings and priests and teachers of God's way of life, we must look to Christ's example.

Jesus was the greatest teacher ever to walk the earth, even His critics acknowledged His uniqueness. So we need to know *how* Christ was the greatest teacher of all time, and to follow that example.

Let me give you five major areas of Christ's example:

1. Christ was a master of His subject.

He knew Scripture. He repeatedly corrected the Pharisees about their misinterpretation of it.

In Matthew 22:29 He said, "You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God." Even when they knew its literal application, He rebuked their lack of understanding the spiritual intent. Christ quoted Scripture from memory in the way the Bible is to become part of our minds. Knowing Scripture can safeguard us from the lies, deceit, and heresy prophesied for the latter days.

One key to knowing whether you are qualified to be a king and priest in God's Kingdom is the extent that you know Scripture and can understand and apply its spiritual intent.

**II Timothy 2:15** Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker

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who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

## 2. Christ set a blameless example.

His words match His actions. He practiced what He preached. A common expression goes, "I can't hear what you're saying, because your actions speak too loudly." Words and actions often fail to match. Paul warned the Roman Christians about such hypocrisy. In Romans 2, he wrote,

**Romans 2:21-23** You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

It comes down to whether you are a professing Christian or a real one. True Christians practice what they preach.

## 3. Christ knew human nature.

Christ did not need human adulation, because He knew what was in man, and He understood their lusts, passions, and desires. Knowing this, He was not deceived by appearances and flattering words. He often knew in advance what others were thinking and could recognize evil motives.

We often think we know someone else's intent by body language, facial expression, or attitudes. But perception is not always that easy. Often we are wrong.

Proverbs 23:7 warns that a hearty welcome to dinner may hide vain motives. We have to look into God's law and see what human nature is, and then walk away from it. We have to recognize that our greatest fight is with our own self, *not* with others.

## 4. Christ was master of His emotions.

Christ's thoughts and emotions were always under control. He got *righteously* angry

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when He threw the moneychangers out of the Temple. That was godly indignation and  
was appropriate.

In Ephesians 4:26 Paul admonishes, “Let not the sun go down on your wrath,” which  
means do not carry angry attitudes over into another day.

When Christ was falsely accused and attacked by angry people, He kept calm and  
controlled. When He was physically abused and assaulted, He held His emotions in  
check. He always epitomized self-control and discipline.

To reflect His life, you must also be making progress in this area of emotional maturity  
and discipline. Proverbs 22:24-25 warns, “Make no friendship with an angry man, and  
with a furious man do not go, lest you learn his ways and set a snare for your soul.”

If you know people who get furious and overly upset, who are always depressed and  
negative, who yell at people and fly off the handle, do not associate with such people  
and do not identify with such behavior. Instead, know Christ’s emotional discipline and  
follow that example.

##### 5. Christ was dedicated to doing God’s work.

All His thoughts and energies were directed at fulfilling the commission God had given  
Him.

In John 9:4 He said, “I must work the works of Him who sent me.” John 5:30 tells us that  
His sole purpose in life was to perform the will of God the Father. Likewise, we must  
have Jesus’ dedication and zeal in doing the work God has given us.

Remember what Christ commanded in Matthew 24.

**Matthew 24:14** And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the  
world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

That is one of the main reasons we were called at this time. However, we must not  
neglect our personal relationship with the Father and His Son, our submission to them,  
and our spiritual growth. We must have our priorities in the right order; remembering our  
responsibility to love and care for our physical family and our spiritual family.

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Notice one of the ways Christ defines the work of God.

**John 6:28-29** 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."

Belief in Christ means not only believing what He teaches but also living it, applying it, and teaching it to others. We will grow spiritually in proportion to how much our hearts are in the work of God.

In God's Kingdom what matters is not necessarily the length of service, but your attitude towards Him, your desire to please Him, and to be like Him. God does not count service as people do; He is interested in the heart—the attitude.

Let me give you an example. After King Saul's continued rebellion against God and his subsequent rejection by the LoORD, Samuel was commissioned to seek out the one who would succeed Saul on the throne of Israel. This one had already been identified as a man after God's own heart, and one of Saul's neighbors who was better than he.

David had been chosen to be ruler of Israel. The rejection of Saul did not force God to a new course of action. Rather, God's action followed His omniscient plan in such a way as to use Saul's disobedience as the human occasion for implementing His higher plan.

God had permitted the people to have the king of their choice. Now that that king and their mistake in choosing him had been clearly manifested, God proved the superiority of His own wisdom in raising up a king who would come in fulfillment of His perfect will.

**I Samuel 16:7** But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at his physical stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Outward appearance cannot predict whether someone will faithfully obey God, because a person's actions flow from his heart. The heart in Scripture refers to a person's inward moral and spiritual life, including the emotions, will, and reason.

God is interested in the heart. We are interested in time. We all clock in and count the time we have spent, the work we have done. Like the first men in the parable we claim

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to have done all, and boast of the time we have spent in the work.

And if we are not among those who went in at the beginning, we are concerned because we have not done this and that, and because we have missed all this time. God is not interested in our work in this way. It is the widow's mite He is interested in.

It is not the amount of money; it was the woman's heart. And it is the same in that parable in Matthew 20. For the same reason He gave the people who had been in the vineyard for only one hour the same as He gave to those who had been in all day.

God is not interested in the time; He is interested in the relationship. He has a different way of looking at things. He does not see as people do; He does not compute as they do; it is all grace on His part from beginning to end, especially when it comes to salvation. Salvation cannot be earned; it cannot be acquired through good works; it is the gift of God.

The last laborers in Matthew 20 received a coin exactly as did the first; they were given the same wages as the first. The truth is impressed upon us by Jesus Christ, "So the last will be first, and the first last. For many are called, but few chosen."

So we have to cease thinking in this carnal, human, fleshly manner. The general rule is that of grace when it comes to salvation and of works when it comes to rewards.

## Conclusion

Let us begin to wrap this up. What else is essentially important in combating hopeless regrets that lead to spiritual depression? Here is an admonition from the Old Testament.

**Ecclesiastes 11:4-6** He who observes the wind will not sow, and he who regards the clouds will not reap. As you do not know what is the way of the wind, or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, so you do not know the works of God who makes everything. In the morning sow your seed, and in the evening do not withhold your hand; for you do not know which will prosper, either this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

Three times here Solomon emphasizes that there are certain things that you do not know. In watching for the wind a farmer has no idea which path (direction) it will take. He is as ignorant of that as he is of something he cannot see such as a baby's body being formed in its mother's womb. We cannot know the future or the works of God who

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has made and controls all things.

Solomon uses an example in verse 6 of the polar opposites of morning and evening to indicate total days to urge people to work diligently, sowing their seed all day long, because they cannot know which sowing will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both would do equally well. He urges people toward constant, diligent effort and prudent diversified investment of their energies and resources, recognizing that *all* is in God's sovereign control.

If you are someone who has spent a lifetime in sin and the world, someone who has been called into the church in old age, and who has been tempted in the way I have been describing, here is a word of advice from the apostle Paul, especially in the evening of your life—make sure you are not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

**Romans 12:3-11** For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.

To behave like a Christian we have to serve the Lord diligently and with genuineness of heart. In the morning, sow your seed, and then with equal force in the evening do not withhold your hand. And then, remember, what is perhaps one of the most comforting and wonderful things that is found anywhere in Scripture, the words spoken to the prophet Joel as he was given the great vision and understanding of the coming of Christ.

In Joel 2:25, this was what he was given to speak: "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten." He has promised to do it; He can do it. The wasted years, the barren years, the years that the locusts and canker-worms and the caterpillars and all

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these things have devoured, until there was nothing apparently left, of them He says, "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten."

If you think of this in terms of what you can do with your strength and power, then time is of the essence of the contract. But we are functioning in the spiritual realm where that does not matter.

He comes in, and He can give us a crop in one year that will make up for ten—"I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten." That is the character of our God, and that is the character of our Savior. They can restore to us whatever we need.

If we are striving to know Scripture and live a blameless life, if we know our real enemy and are gaining supremacy over our hard-to-handle emotions, and if we are devoting our every effort to doing our part in God's great work, then, the Father and Christ will be well pleased with you.

So in light of all this, never look back again; never waste your time in the present; never waste your energy; forget the past except to learn its lessons; and rejoice in the fact that, if you are a true Christian, you are in Christ by the grace of God. In the scheme of God's plan of salvation you will have the greatest surprise of your life and existence; and you will find that God's gift of salvation and eternal life, and your reward will be far above your greatest expectations. Paul tells us in I Corinthians 2,

**I Corinthians 2:9** But as it is written: "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."

Praise God for the fact that we are in His church, and that He has a place prepared for us.