

Don't Take God For Granted

Spiritual Negligence

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I would like to start off by relating four short stories that all involve people who made some tragic mistakes. These mistakes resulted in the deaths of three individuals and the crippling of the fourth. See if you can pick out the cause or the common thread that set the stage for what took place.

In the 1940s there was a magazine called *True Magazine*. It was not like the *Enquirer* or *True Confessions*. They had articles about adventure and about interesting and unusual people.

One particular issue had a story about a woman called "The Snake Lady." This woman had learned to handle cobras. She had two twelve-foot specimens that she would "walk." She had also learned that a cobra does not strike like any other snake. A cobra does not have fangs like a rattlesnake that will penetrate its prey. A cobra has to "chew" its venom into its victim.

So she learned that by holding the palm of her hand in front of the cobra and arching her fingers backward, her palm would tighten like a drum. Then she would allow the cobra to strike the center of her hand and it could not hurt her. She became quite famous.

"The Snake Lady" would bring these cobras out of their cage. She would then arch her hand and they would strike her palm two or three times. They would then be calmed down and she would stroke their hoods and put them back in their cage. This required the most uninterrupted attention and concentration.

True Magazine went and took pictures of her walking her two twelve-foot king cobras. It was quite impressive. They asked, "Would you mind if we watched you calm down one of your new cobras?"

This was something she never allowed. She never allowed anyone to watch her calm down a brand new addition to her menagerie. But she acquiesced and said, "Sure, you can come along." And so the photographer was there with a reporter and she allowed the cobra out of the cage. It immediately crawled up and the hood expanded. She then put her hand up in front of the cobra, arched her fingers back, tightened her palm. At the last second somebody said something. She turned her head just for a second.

The picture on the front of *True Magazine* was out of focus, but it showed the cobra biting her little finger and she died just a few minutes later.

Here is the second story: A father and son, and some of their friends went out hunting. Upon returning to the camp afterward, the father took his rifle and threw it on a mattress in the back of the camper shell. The stock and the butt were pointed toward the cab and the muzzle towards the tailgate.

When they all arrived home the father reached in and grabbed the muzzle of the rifle and pulled it toward him. But the rifle's trigger caught on a mattress button and the gun discharged. He was killed.

Now the third story: At a factory I once worked at there was a man assigned to operate a large crane. This was quite some time ago and the cranes at that time were not as well equipped as they are now.

Every so often this man would have to pull the crane's cable entirely off of the drum for maintenance. He would stretch this cable out so that he could lubricate it as he rewound it back onto the drum.

One very cold morning he went out there with his jacket zipped up. He pulled the cable off the drum and in doing so he got quite warm. Upon returning to the cab he unzipped his jacket and started to lean out over the drum to rewind the cable. The jacket got caught in the drum and, before anyone could get to him, he was crushed.

Now the last story: I used to work in a large corrugated box plant. They would run flat, corrugated boxes through large printing presses. When the job was done and the run had been completed, the steel rollers had to be cleaned by taking a regular solvent-filled rag and wiping them down. You had to cut off the power, partially turn the roller, wipe it down, turn the roller part way again, wipe it down again—until the two rollers were clean.

When people were in a big rush they would leave the press running with the solvent-filled rag held up against the steel rollers. They got away with this for years. The big danger was not that the rag would be pulled into the press; the big danger was that the press operator would actually try and hold on to the rag. This would, of course, result in an arm being pulled into the press. And this did eventually happen at the plant in which I was working.

Now what was the common thread that caused all four of these tragedies? The first one that may come to mind is that these four individuals were simply being careless. The synonyms for careless are: inattentive—in this case inattentive to the dangers involved in what they were doing; thoughtless or unmindful—not having their mind on what was taking place; negligent—forgetting all the rules that were in place for their safety; and reckless—an attitude of "it cannot happen to me." These were all certainly involved.

The antonyms for the above would be conscientious, thoughtful, careful, and cautious.

It could indeed be said that familiarity breeds contempt. I do not know if any of these people were necessarily careless, or actually contemptuous of the rules that would have prevented these tragic accidents. They most probably were all trained correctly. Had they trained somebody else they certainly would have told them all of the safety rules. So what was bred here by familiarity was probably carelessness.

But even though all these adjectives seem to identify the problem, there is one more common attitude that seems to—sooner or later—affects all of us. That is taking what we are doing for granted!

We take many things for granted. We think we can eat whatever we want and that somehow our body will survive. We can take for granted that we are going to wake up tomorrow. We put the key in the car and we know it is going to start. We just take it for granted.

Some things we take for granted can really hurt us. We had a man that worked at the office where I worked and he smoked like a chimney! People would tell him that those cigarettes would hurt him and he would casually respond, "Everybody must die sometime." But when it came his time to die he was terrified and he wished he had not taken his body and health for granted.

Now this is all very normal, but I would like to zero in on one area of life that is far too easy to neglect—and far too dangerous to do so! That is the taking of one's friends for granted or, in this case, taking God for granted.

To "take for granted" means to be complacent or neglectful. Some synonyms for complacent are (so we can really get the picture): apathetic—which in turn means unresponsive, unemotional, and unconcerned. Impervious is part of being complacent and it means being inaccessible and impenetrable. It means nobody can get to you. You just are not going to wake up. Indifferent means to be detached and impassive.

Some antonyms are: concerned, sensitive, and enthusiastic.

Neglectful: that means to ignore—which means to disregard and to neglect and in a sense to scorn; overlook, to forget, to slight, to procrastinate, to stall, to defer, to temporize; to dawdle (that is a good word); hesitate, tarry. To be neglectful is to be evasive, to avoid, dodge, escape, and it means to be indifferent, disinterested, and to be insensible—to have insensibility towards something.

The antonyms are: to acknowledge, remember, to hurry, hasten, to show concern—in other words: to eagerly care for the relationship.

I am sure that all of these people who had these tragic accidents, at one time in their lives, were very concerned about having a proper physical relationship with the rules that would have protected them. I do not doubt there is any hunter alive that has not had some firearm training. Perhaps there are some, but I do doubt there are many. Always unload the piece when you come back in. When crossing over a fence with a double-barrel shotgun you always open it up so that it cannot accidentally discharge.

As for the crane operator and the pressman I am sure that they read the manuals. I am sure they knew the rules of safety. And I am sure they knew the danger—but they took shortcuts! I am sure that the snake handler knew the tremendous concentration it took to keep her hand right in front of that cobra's mouth. But slowly, over a long period of time and because they had always gotten by day after day, they began to take what they were doing for granted.

It strikes me how suddenly and painfully disaster can strike. For each of these four people it was an average day. Maybe one had planned to go to the movies that night or somewhere else. You see that all of a sudden disaster came down around their head. It all happened "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye!"

In God's Word we see similar results occurring when people take God for granted.

Leviticus 6:9-13 Command Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the law of the burnt offering: The burnt offering shall be on the hearth upon the altar all night until morning, and the fire of the altar shall be kept burning on it. 'And the priest shall put on his linen garment, and his linen trousers he shall put on his body, and take up the ashes of the burnt offering which the fire has consumed on the altar, and he shall put them beside the altar. 'Then he shall take off his garments, put on other garments, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a clean place. 'And the fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it; it shall not be put out. And the priest shall burn wood on it every morning, and lay the

burnt offering in order on it; and he shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. 'A perpetual fire shall be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.

This is what God wanted.

Leviticus 9:23-24 And Moses and Aaron went into the tabernacle of meeting, and came out and blessed the people. Then the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

Here God started the fire.

Leviticus 10:1-3 Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke, saying: 'By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.' "

We do not know exactly what had happened, but verse 9 may provide some insight into this incident.

Leviticus 10:9 "Do not drink wine or intoxicating drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the tabernacle of meeting, lest you die. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations,

What we see here is that God is saying, "I will not allow you to become complacent or neglectful concerning Me. I will not allow you to take Me for granted." There has been much speculation as to exactly what had occurred. Did these men get drunk? Did they fall asleep? Did they just think they had to get extra coals? We do not know, but God did not take it lightly!

We live in a country where we take our freedom for granted. We do not think about the national character and what it is going to produce. We forget the laws of honesty and decency that make society work properly. We forget as a nation to love God and to love our fellowman.

In essence we take for granted what God has given us. We treat our national blessings as though we have always had them and as though we deserve them. And we neglect to live by the rules that build and govern our nation's relationship with God.

Thomas Jefferson said in his *Notes on Virginia*: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." And if Thomas Jefferson trembled at that time, certainly the leadership of this nation should tremble now!

This attitude of carelessly taking for granted how we live can rub off on us—and do not think that we are immune! Do we think perhaps we are better than this world? How much better: 25 percent, 50 percent? When this world declines in its morality are we still only 25 percent or 50 percent better? In other words, do *our* morals degrade with the world's morals? This world is infecting the church.

Beware of the danger of overlooking the great purpose God is working out in us. Beware of taking God for granted!

Let us take a trip down "memory lane." Do you remember when you first came into the church? Do you recall the excitement that you felt? Did you take God for granted at all back then? No, you did not.

We carefully measured everything we did. How does God want me to do this? How does He want me to do that? It was a constant mindset. As Mr. Armstrong used to say, we had to have a big funnel put into our heads and pour everything we could in there just to absorb it all.

We would ask God about how to raise our children. The husbands wanted to be the best husbands they could be, but it did not always work out that way. The wives tried to do the best job of homemaking and raising the children.

We learned that we were to be the best employees because we were not working for the employer, we were working for God. We were setting an example for mankind. We were faithful to tithe and we carefully watched our finances. We were very selective about what we watched in the movies or what we read or what we watched on the television. We made sure we prayed and studied every day and we fasted often.

In general we were very careful not to be complacent, or neglectful, or to take God for granted in any way. But over the years the hard part became the day-to-day living. After a while, like these other people that had these tragedies, we began to take what we were doing for granted.

All of us have had to stand up for what we believe and we think that takes the pressure off a bit. I think that we are in the eye of the storm right now. We have seen what God has done through Herbert Armstrong and we are now being measured by that standard. If we understand Revelation 10 and 11 correctly, we are being measured by God and we are waiting for the next thing that He is going to do—which may possibly be His sending of the Two Witnesses. So in many ways we may feel that the pressure is off.

Truly, if we see God clearly we cannot take Him for granted. This is an important principle that I would like to amplify just a bit. We cannot take His purpose for our calling for granted. It is God's purpose for us—the result He wants from us—that we must keep as a beacon in the forefront of our minds. This is why He called us. This is going to color all that we do.

How do we become complacent? Why do we become complacent and neglectful in our relationship with God? There are three reasons we will discuss.

The first one is: we neglect our prayer and Bible study. That may sound trite and rather standard. Remember when we first came into the church and people would ask Mr. Armstrong about how long one would have to pray and study. We all want to quantify these things thinking that would make us righteous. And he would say that one would have to pray at least one-half hour per day and study one-half hour per day just to be in the Kingdom of God.

I remembered that and when I was brand new in the church I was not used to praying a half hour per day. In fact, I did not know how to pray a half hour per day. Maybe some of you had that problem as well. Once I was out of town in San Diego and I awoke one morning to what I knew was going to be an especially busy day. I got down on my knees and said, "Father, I do not want to pray to you today. I do not want to pray half an hour. I want to get going!"

I have always felt that I had better tell God what is in my mind because He already knows anyway and there is no big secret there. But I then said, "I promised You I was going to pray a half hour per day." So I got down on my knees and I prayed. Then I looked at the clock. Then I prayed some more. Then I looked at the clock. And then I prayed some more.

That was probably the best day I ever had in my life, because God knew what a bumbler and a stumbler that I was and He honored my prayer.

Now since then people have come and asked, "How do I pray that long?" I would tell them to read Psalm 119 and pick a section of that. Or read Psalm 51 when you are having a problem. Read Psalm 8 and thank God that He is even concerned about you.

Some people will take a "prayer list." Some people do not use one. Some keep what one might call a "prayer log." And when prayers have been answered they can go back and look at that.

As I progressed I found that I had to get up early in the morning. First I would start at 6:00 a.m. then it was 5:30 a.m. and finally it was 5:00 a.m. so that I could be sure and have sufficient time to pray without feeling hurried.

Did you ever ask questions about Bible study? Why does God want us to study the Bible? Do we ever study for the *wrong* reasons: just to get facts or for reasons of vanity or to be thought well of?

Remember that one reason we take God for granted is because we do not see Him. What, then, is the purpose of study? We should be studying the Bible to sharpen our image of God. That is our purpose—to be God! We sharpen our image of God through study so that we will be able to emulate God.

What does God want? He wants to see Himself in us! What did the apostle Paul say in I Corinthians 11:1? He said to follow him as he follows Jesus Christ. You see we are to follow Jesus Christ as well.

God wants us to take our prayer and Bible study seriously!

I Timothy 4:14-16 Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership. Meditate on these things; give yourself entirely to them, that your progress may be evident to all. Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

This is, of course, instruction to a minister, but it applies to us as well. Paul is telling Timothy not to allow himself to become careless and neglect the calling, the wonderful opportunity that has been given to him. He said to meditate and think on what great thing has been given to him. He told him to have it fastened deeply in his heart. Timothy was told to give himself wholly to it and be absorbed by it.

This is what God wants from us. Paul also says to watch our life and our doctrine closely. Give attention to yourself and to the teaching. He says to not let down, continue, persevere, because in so doing you are going to save yourself and those who hear you. This applies to us, too.

Hebrews 2:1-3 Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him.

Because God has spoken to us by His Son, and because His Son is so great and so glorious a Person, and because the subject which is addressed is of such infinite importance to us and to our welfare, He says we ought to give the more earnest heed to it.

The word "earnest" is an important word. It means abundantly, it means more exceedingly, it means much more frequently and it means more super-abundant heed. He is saying to really pay attention to what God is doing in our lives!

We should pray and study with great care and concern lest we should let God's Word *slip*. Now this means to "let it (God's Word) run out"—to leak out like a barrel with a cracked stave. The barrel is full and it very slowly starts to leak.

Another analogy would be to "drift away." You can envision a rowboat being tied up to a pier and the rope loosens and falls into the water. You can reach down and grab the rope and retie it. But if you do not, then the boat (which was floating right next to the piling) slowly starts to drift away. Soon it will be ten feet away, then fifteen feet, and pretty soon it is out over the horizon where the water is rough. We are told to not let that happen. Do not let it drift away, pay attention! If we become superficial in our prayer and study, then our vision of God will begin to disappear.

If those without God's Spirit who heard God's Word died in the wilderness (now that was their correction, but their chance is still ahead) how much greater will be our punishment. For us God says, "Pay attention!" Our chance is now! And if we are not successful then this is our *only* chance! He says to see the scope of what God is doing in our lives. God is telling us here that we are to constantly remind ourselves of His purpose for our calling. We must pray and study with that purpose at the forefront of our minds.

The second cause of complacency and neglect toward God is: *we become involved with the world*. This also takes our minds off of God and blurs our vision.

Matthew 13:22 "Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful."

Here we see a picture of seed being sown in a field that is plowed but not weeded. This represents a person hearing God's Word, but then that Word is allowed to be pushed out by the cares with which he is involved.

I am sure that all of us during our time in God's church know of some who have left the church.

I remember one man who decided that it was more important to not pay his taxes—and to fight that crusade—than it was to stay in God's church. So he did that and it actually smothered him. It says

that the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches "choke." The word for *choke* here means, "to smother." When you are smothered oxygen begins to leave the brain. And when oxygen leaves the brain you cannot function, nor can you think.

We live in the "end of the age." At this tumultuous time we have the accompanying pressures—and the escapes from those pressures—all around! This world is designed by Satan. This end time is designed to produce brain failure where God is concerned!

We had an old man in the Garden Grove church, a fine man. Every time someone would leave the church he would go and ask, "Why did so-and-so leave the church?" And the minister, for a while, thought that he was being nosy. But the old man said, "No, I just wanted to find out why they left so I will not make the same mistake."

I had a very good friend, a "brother" with whom I had "sweet counsel" together for many a year. He transferred back east and went to work in a large mine. He was promoted and continued to advance in the company. Soon thereafter, the company became more important than the church—and he left!

Two great mental assassins in our day are, one: being heavily in debt. Sometimes that just happens and you cannot help it. And two: the entertainment industry. One causes constant worry of how you are going to pay the bills. The other leads you to wrong thoughts, actions, and principles because these are constantly offered to you, passing for entertainment.

Adam Clark made the following comments: "man is anxious over worldly cares with the delusive hopes and promises of riches. This causes man to abandon the great concerns of the soul and seek in their place what he shall eat, what he shall drink, and wherewithal he shall be clothed. It is the dreadful stupidity of man thus to barter spiritual for temporal good—a heavenly inheritance for an empty portion."

That is, of course, Matthew 6:33—"seek you first the Kingdom of God." If there is ever a section in the Bible that directs us to keep our life simple, this is the one right here!

Now the third cause I listed as that which takes away the image of God is: to see God is to require that we change—and we just do not want to do it!

There is an interesting scripture in John where Jesus Christ is responding to the Jews who were questioning Him.

John 5:39-40 "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. "But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life.

The word for "search" is really interesting. It is the word *ereuano*. It means, "to search, examine into." It may be implied to "search by uncovering; to search minutely; to explore; to strip, to make bare; to search by feeling, by touch."

Homer, in *The Iliad*, used this word to indicate a lioness and her dedication to her cubs. They were lost and she was on a huge plain searching everywhere very carefully. In *The Odyssey*, he used the same word to picture a dog tracking its prey—having its nose on the footprint and never taking it off.

Metaphorically it can also be used to describe one as digging deep for treasure and precious metal and breaking every single clod that nothing would be lost. It means to shake and to sift until every meaning of every sentence; and of every word; and of every syllable; and indeed, of every letter may be known and understood.

Jesus Christ is saying that these people search out every little, minute thing striving for eternal life. But they were not willing to come to Him, humble themselves, and change so that they would have life!

Can this happen to us today? Sure it can! We can see things that we do not want to change in our lives or we procrastinate. This is what is being pictured. Luke 18 gives us an example:

Luke 18:9-14 Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. "The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. 'I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' "And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Here we see an example of one man who thought that he was doing wonderfully well. He probably knew more than the tax collector ever would. But the tax collector had the humility to humble himself before God and to try and change.

John 12:4-6 Then one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the moneybox; and he used to take what was put in it.

Judas had been with Jesus Christ for three and one-half years and this was some six days before Jesus was to be crucified. Here we see Judas' habit. He had been with Christ at campfires and had heard His sermons and teachings. He had been involved in the camaraderie and the special education that you get when you are with a small group like that. But Judas never saw Jesus clearly enough to make a change in his life. He was a thief from the beginning and he never said, "All these things apply to me and I have to change." And because of this, in his final act, it eventually caused his death. He hung himself after actually seeing what he was! He had never seen it prior to that time.

Romans 6:16 Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?

Judas chose sin. He chose to enslave himself to that and not change.

How can we tell that we are taking God for granted? By the fruit that is being produced. Are you happy with your life? Is your marriage good? Do you and your spouse love each other and are your children happy? Are you training them?

I do not mean that there are no bumps along the way. We all have those. What kind of fruit is being produced? If you are close to God and if you love God and are trying to be like Him then the fruit in your life is going to reflect that. If you are not close to God then the fruit produced is going to reflect that, too. God has a way of getting to us when we tend to take Him for granted.

Look at II Samuel 6. This was a tremendous event that was going to take place. The Ark of the Covenant was about to be brought up from Baale Judah and it was just exciting! There were some thirty thousand soldiers here—special soldiers—"chosen men." There were probably another twenty or thirty thousand people or more on the scene. This was a huge event! The streets were lined with cheering throngs of people! This was a very joyous time for the nation of Israel!

The story is familiar to us. They had placed the ark on a cart and...

II Samuel 6:1 Again David gathered all the choice men of Israel, thirty thousand.

II Samuel 6:6-7 And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against Uzzah, and God struck him there for his error; and he died there by the ark of God.

II Samuel 6:9 David was afraid of the Lord that day; and he said, "How can the ark of the Lord come to me?"

David was afraid of the ark—and of God! Let us notice, however, that God did not rush down and give David the answer. He did not say, "David, do you see what you have done wrong?" He did not explain to David just why He struck Uzzah. He made David work through the problem.

He does the same thing with us. When we find that we are out of sync with God He does not simply rush to intervene and say, "Now there, there, my son." He does not pat us on the head and say, "You are alright."

Rather, He says, in effect, "Now do you understand that you are in hot water?" He asks, "Are you feeling pain?" And you say, "Yes!" And He says, "Well, alright, now can you figure out why?" And so we have to do that.

Upon close examination we find that those who had advised David were complacent and neglectful. They thought that because the ark came to them on a cart from the Philistines they could simply send it on to where it was supposed to go in like manner. We see that did not work out so well!

The instructions for how to properly carry the ark are found in I Chronicles 15:2, 14-15. I am sure that these instructions were originally learned correctly because David had to work his way through the problem.

Can we make mistakes like this? David was "a man after God's own heart!" Of course we can! David made mistakes left and right and yet God loved him. When God puts us through such things it does not mean that we are not cared for. David committed adultery with Bathsheba; killed Uriah the Hittite; caused the death of thousands and the death of his son, Absalom. All because he took God's laws for granted.

And we, too, can become complacent and neglectful as to how we live our lives. And if we do not respond to God then He is going to increase the pressure on us.

Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 are the "blessings and cursings" chapters of the Bible. It may have been quite some time since last we read these sections. Consider these scriptures in light of what we have just discussed: the increasing pressure that God applies in order to draw us closer to Him and to stop taking Him for granted. We will look at the section in Leviticus here.

Leviticus 26:14-29 But if you do not obey Me [take Me for granted and treat Me neglectfully], and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you. 'And after all this, if you do not obey Me [if you still take Me for granted and if you still neglect Me], then I will punish you seven times more for your sins. I will break the pride of your power; I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze. And your strength shall be spent in vain; for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit. 'Then, if you [still take Me for granted] and walk contrary to Me, and are not willing to obey Me, I will bring on you seven times more plagues, according to your sins. I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, destroy your livestock, and make you few in number; and your highways shall be desolate. 'And if by these things you [still take Me for granted] are not reformed by Me, but walk contrary to Me, then I also will walk contrary to you, and I will punish you yet seven times for your sins. And I will bring a sword against you that will execute the vengeance of the covenant; when you are gathered together within your cities I will send pestilence among you; and you shall be delivered into the hand of the enemy. When I have cut off your supply of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in one oven, and they shall bring back your bread by weight, and you shall eat and not be satisfied. 'And after all this, if you do not obey Me [if you still are complacent and you continue to neglect Me and take Me for granted], but walk contrary to Me, then I also will walk contrary to you in fury; and I, even I, will chastise you seven times for your sins. You shall eat the flesh of your sons, and you shall eat the flesh of your daughters.

Can we see how these *curses* are increasingly intensified each time Israel fails to repent of neglecting of God?

Leviticus 26:30-32 I will destroy your high places, cut down your incense altars, and cast your carcasses on the lifeless forms of your idols; and My soul shall abhor you. I will lay your cities waste and bring your sanctuaries to desolation, and I will not smell the fragrance of your sweet aromas. I will bring the land to desolation, and your enemies who dwell in it shall be astonished at it.

Our enemies will look at us and be astonished! They will wonder at what God has done to us! They will see what tragic results our complacency toward God has reaped!

But then God also says that if we turn our heart around, if we accept our guilt and change (repent), He is going to remember His covenant. So we see that God will, indeed, increase this pressure on us. This is for all of us—to get our attention! Once He has it, then He can teach us and we can begin to learn.

We find a similar principle in Zechariah 14. After the return of Jesus Christ, God says that if the Egyptians do not come up to keep the Feast of Tabernacles He will cut off the rain. And the next time they neglect His commands they will have a pestilence until He—what?—gets their attention!

What is really important to God? What does He want us to see? How does He want us to live our lives?

James 1:25-27 But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

What He is saying here is that we should have a heart that is tender. Go out and take care of the widow, the young, the elderly and have a heart that loves them. "This is what I want from you," God is saying. It is not complicated.

He is not asking you to climb a mountain you cannot climb. He says to be a decent person and show love to others. Then He gives you a big order, especially at this time: keep unspotted from the world. What do you allow in your house? What do you do while you are away? You know what that means: it means to come out of the world!

I Timothy 1:3-6 As I urged you when I went into Macedonia—remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine, nor give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith. Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith, from which some, having strayed, have turned aside to idle talk, desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say nor the things which they affirm.

Paul is telling Timothy here to command those who are teaching false doctrine to stop the fables and the endless genealogies. They do not edify. He says the purpose or the goal is to have a pure heart and faith and a good conscience from God. That is what God wants from us. He wants us to love and have faith and have a good conscience. Paul wanted Timothy to expand the horizons. He told him to stop and think of what God wanted from him. In verse 6 and 7, we can see quite a few did not do it.

Micah 6:6-8 With what shall I come before the Lord, And bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

What is it that God wants from us? To emulate Him, that is what He wants from us!

Psalm 51:10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

Psalm 51:16-17 For You do not desire sacrifice, or else I would give it; You do not delight in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise.

We are probably all familiar with Psalm 51. In fact, we sing the Psalm, "Create in me a clean heart." This is David's request. He tells us, "You (God) do not want sacrifice. You do not delight in burnt offerings." He says that the sacrifices which are acceptable to God are a broken spirit and a broken, contrite heart. These things God is not going to despise. This is what God wants, a broken and contrite heart.

Jeremiah 22:1-4 Thus says the Lord: "Go down to the house of the king of Judah, and there speak this word, "and say, 'Hear the word of the Lord, O king of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David, you and your servants and your people who enter these gates! 'Thus says the Lord: "Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place. "For if you indeed do this thing, then shall enter the gates of this house, riding on horses and in chariots, accompanied by servants and people, kings who sit on the throne of David.

Blessings are going to come from doing what is right.

Isaiah 1:12-17 "When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, To trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.

He is not saying the New Moons and the assemblies are wrong. What He is saying here is to wash yourselves and make yourselves clean. Put away the evil of your doings from before God and cease to do evil. Learn to do good, seek justice, reprove the oppressor, defend the fatherless and plead for the widow. Exert concern and care for all those with whom you deal. And the final principle in this particular area is:

Matthew 5:22 "But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

I could never understand what was meant when scripture described one who was angry without cause. I thought everybody had to have a *cause* to be angry. What He is saying here is that if you have an angry nature—if you go off the deep end at the drop of a hat and you are just that kind of a person—that is a character flaw of which one must repent.

Matthew 5:23-24 "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, "leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

To the best of my knowledge, this is the only place where that word 'reconciled' is used. It just means to have peace with your brother. For us to have peace with one another is what God wants. What God is saying here is that we should not attempt to bring our offerings when we are at odds with our brethren.

Now we do not bring offerings today, like burnt offerings. But what do we bring before God as offerings? We bring Him prayers. And God says that before you come to Him with your prayers and that type of an offering, go make amends. He says we must go to our friend and settle it.

The very essence of God is love. He epitomizes outgoing concern for other people and this is what love is all about. Thus we have to make changes in our lives to conform to that. We must conform to God's standard so that our prayers will be fully accepted by Him. God expects us to reflect His love in everything we do. And He wants peace.

You see what God is saying here is what Mr. Armstrong said. God wants us to build godly character. Quoting from Herbert Armstrong's *Mystery of the Age*, page 69:

But there was one super-important quality that even God's creative powers could not create instantly by fiat—the same perfect, holy, righteous character inherent in both God and the Word. This kind of character must be developed, by the choice and the intent of the one in whom it comes to exists.

So this kind of godly character has to be developed by the choice and the intent of the one in whom it exists. This principle is summed up in a most succinct manner in Luke 10:

Luke 10:25 And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

That is a good question, certainly one that all of us ask.

Luke 10:26-28 He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" So he answered and said, " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

So if you want the formula to be in the Kingdom of God, that is the formula, it is just that simple. Or is it just that simple?

We should love the Lord our God more than anything else. Nothing is to take precedent over God; not our desires, nor our will, nor anything else. God is always first.

We are to love God with all of our soul. That means we are to be ready to give up our life to honor God if it is required. It means we are to endure all types of ridicule and torment if it falls our lot. That is part of loving God.

It is our loving God with all of our strength. Whatever we possess came from God. If we do something to physically serve God or if we have to give our substance as living sacrifice—this is just part of loving God with all of our strength.

How do we love God with all of our mind?

II Corinthians 10:5 ...casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,

In other words, what would Jesus Christ do here? What would He think? We had better think the same way. Casting out wrong thoughts implies that we are studying to have the right thoughts in our minds.

Adam Clarke summed up the first part of verse 28 this way:

In a word, he [one thinking with and using the mind of Christ] sees God in all things; thinks of Him at all times; has his mind continually fixed upon God; acknowledges Him in all his ways. He begins, continues, and ends all his thoughts, words and works, to the glory of His name. This is the person who loves God with all of his heart, his might, and strength and his intellect.

That is a tall order, but that is exactly what God wants from us. He wants us to have Him in our minds this way. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We are to love our neighbors as ourselves. It is pretty self-explanatory.

If you are in trouble, do you want someone to come and help you? Yes! Do you want someone to listen to you when you need someone's ear? Of course you do. If you want to be helped in your finances, and someone comes to help, are you appreciative of that someone? We should be concerned for others, as we are concerned for ourselves. I do not know about you, but I get pretty concerned about myself sometimes. Stub a toe, and I get pretty concerned for myself.

Mr. Armstrong said that the building of character is incumbent, or rests, on making right choices. We have not read this for a lot of years, but let us review this:

Perfect, holy, and righteous character is the ability in such separate entity to come to discern the true and right way from the false, to make voluntarily a full and unconditional surrender to God and His perfect way—to yield to be conquered by God—to determine even against temptation or self desire, to live and to do the right. And even then such holy character is the gift of God. It comes by yielding to God to instill His Law (God's right way of life) within the entity who so decides and wills. (*Mystery of the Ages*, p. 69)

Now if we see God in this way we will not take Him for granted. Now what does God want us to choose?

Ephesians 5:1 Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.

God wants us to follow; to imitate Him. I am reminded of our grandchildren and how they come and they trust me and hug me and tackle me. But you know that they respect me and love me and I am really moved by that.

This is exactly where we are with God. He wants us to love and respect Him and to imitate Him. Now as children of God, we must make the choice then to be like God. Jesus Christ gave Himself as an offering and sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma. And when we are trying to imitate God we are like that same aroma; that same sweet smelling sacrifice.

It is not easy to put on the new man. Ephesians 4:24 tells us that this is what we are to do. Now the old man is on us and sometimes we have a hard time putting on the new. But God says to put on the new man, which is Jesus Christ.

Continuing on in Ephesians 5 we see a listing of character flaws that this old man has. It is no wonder that we are commanded to choose the new!

Ephesians 5:3-6 But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience.

Ephesians 5:21 ...submitting to one another in the fear of God.

We are commanded to show love for and concern for one another. And then we have that famous passage which speaks of the responsibilities of both husband and wife in the marriage relationship:

Ephesians 5:22-27 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish.

These are tall orders; for husbands and wives to love each other in this way.

Now, some years back, a lady came to her pastor and said, "I hate my husband, I cannot stand him and I want to leave him." The pastor asked her why. She said, "He is a grease monkey, he is a mechanic, he never washes, he comes home and he is covered with grease. There is grease on his fingernails and grease on his clothes. He sits on the furniture and he does not bathe at night. He sits at the table that way and he goes to bed dirty and he smells and I cannot stand him!"

The minister was a pretty wise man and he told her, "Well, before you divorce him, let me ask you a question. Is there any one good thing about him?" She said, "He works hard for us." The minister asked, "Have you told him that?" She said, "No." So, she followed the minister's advice. She was

humble enough to yield to that. She went home and she said, "Now honey, the kids and I really appreciate all the hard work that you do for us."

Two weeks went by. She then came to church and she said "Hey, my husband took a bath!" Now we may get a good chuckle from this story, but you see to her it was monumental! He took a bath! She said something nice to him, in deep appreciation. Now in the world in which we live, this may motivate some to compliment another just to get them to do something. We should never do that. Do you know that this man, within six months time, was in the church? All because his wife took time to acknowledge that he was a good worker and that she appreciated that about him.

How many times do we look for what is wrong? We should not do that. How many times do your husbands go to your wives and say "Honey, I appreciate all the housework you do"?

My wife works inside the home. And when I was working, she was working. But now that I have retired, she continues to cook, do the wash, make the bed, and do the shopping. She does all these things and she does them day after day! I retired, she did not!

How often does a wife go to her husband and say, "Sweetheart, I know that you work in a job that you do not really care for and I know that it is really hard on you, but I really appreciate you"?

And how many times do you kids come to your parents and say, "Mom, Dad, you know I give you a bad time once in awhile, but you always put a roof over my head, clothes on my back and food in my stomach, and I really appreciate that"?

And to balance the whole thing out, how many times do you parents go to your children and say to them, "We know that school is tough and that many kids are involved with drugs and many are sexually active, but you are standing up, sweetheart, and we really appreciate this"?

The whole family appreciates this kind of attentiveness and appreciation. We must focus on what good we may find in each other and look at one another in this way. We would have a lot happier household and a lot happier relationship with everybody.

We have to make decisions. We have to make a choice to love somebody. You just do not choose to love somebody for ten minutes, or a week. When you choose to love somebody, it is forever.

Jesus Christ chooses to love us. I know loving us is easy because of our "perfectness," right? He puts up with a lot from us! His love does not quit—it continues on! He is setting the example for us to love others this way as well. It is a decision to love; a choice one makes.

What should our motivation be to overcome? Our culture spends, probably, billions of dollars to motivate people to do something. We have the bonus system. When I was in sales, we were just paid a big bonus and, to some people, that just motivated them wholeheartedly. They would go out and sell, sell, sell until their legs were tired and sore just to get the job done!

Others are motivated because of the challenge. "I am going to climb this mountain, then you put another mountain in front of me, and I will climb that mountain, and the mountain after that!" This is what makes them tick.

Others will do it because they want to please the boss, because he is just a super guy.

But these must not be *our* motivation. Our motivation should be our love of God. We love Him tremendously because of all He has done for us and because of the tremendous calling He has given us. This should be the motivation for us to overcome our human nature.

Jesus Christ and God the Father formed this earth for us. He hung the earth in this solar system, this galaxy, this universe! He started it spinning, rotating—and so it continues! He has given us every good thing. He has given us our calling.

And why has He done this? Because God wants to increase His family—He is reproducing Himself—expanding His very Family! And we are His children!

And here we read (as Jesus Christ is preparing to die):

John 12:24 "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain.

We see that Jesus Christ and God the Father do not want to be alone. They want us with Them. This is why the Father had Jesus give His life. He gave His only begotten Son for us! He sacrificed His Son for us! He gave everything for us and He set this example for us to imitate—to follow.

This should be our motivation to change, to overcome, to take on—to put on Jesus Christ and be like Him.

Matthew 11:11 "Assuredly, I say to you, among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be "least in the Kingdom of Heaven?" I mean, how would you feel? Now if that was the best you could do, that would be wonderful. But if you could do more, how would you feel?

Luke 19:12-26 Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. "So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.' "But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this man to reign over us.' "And so it was that when he returned, having received the kingdom, he then commanded these servants, to whom he had given the money, to be called to him, that he might know how much every man had gained by trading. "Then came the first, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned ten minas.' "And he said to him, 'Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in a very little, have authority over ten cities.' "And the second came, saying, 'Master, your mina has earned five minas.' "Likewise he said to him, 'You also be over five cities.' "Then another came, saying, 'Master, here is your mina, which I have kept put away in a handkerchief. 'For I feared you, because you are an austere man. You collect what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' "And he said to him, 'Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked servant. You knew that I was an austere man, collecting what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow. 'Why then did you not put my money in the bank, that at my coming I might have collected it with interest?' "And he said to those who stood by, 'Take the mina from him, and give it to him who has ten minas.' ("But they said to him, 'Master, he has ten minas.') 'For I say to

you, that to everyone who has will be given; and from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him.

Now suppose you had the ability to earn 10 minas and only earned one—the original mina and 1/100th more? Yet God accepted you. As you stood before Jesus Christ knowing that you could have done a lot better, how would you feel?

Now if a person had just the ability to earn 1/100th of a mina and that was the best he could do, God would be thrilled to pieces because that person would have reached his potential. Your potential is to be like Jesus Christ. So we do not want to let down because we would feel terrible if we did not give it our best shot.

The good news in all of this is that God is the perfect Father. And He knows how to get the best out of all His children.

Philippians 1:6 ...being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ;

In the process of that completion—as His good work continues—there are going to be fiery trials. God is going to perfect us. He is going to try us and test us. At times we may not feel very important and we may want to let down.

But remember that God the Father has called us personally. And He wants to see us earn the highest, the most meaningful, the most useful, and the most helpful office that He can give us. He is working out a great purpose in our lives. It is far greater than we can begin to understand.

So let us work diligently in our efforts to imitate God. Never let down! Never let anything lead us to neglect or become complacent toward God! And *never* carelessly take Him for granted!

Always place Jesus Christ at the forefront of our minds. Always focus on the tremendous example He set. And *always* do everything we can to be like Him! Never take your eyes off God or the great purpose He has set before us.