

Are You Living An Illusion?

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We live in a society that thrives on illusions. There is a culture that imagines that truth is whatever you say it is now. Computer generated images of well known people can be manipulated to say whatever the programmer wants. I just watched a video yesterday of Tom Cruise talking with Gorbachev, and found out after my daughter had showed it to me, that it was entirely computer generated and I thought for sure it was both figures, both Tom Cruise and Gorbachev. And so it is incredible how far that technology has come.

In these post-truth days many people are asking "what is real?" Millions of people are content to be deceived because going along, even with the fake news, is more comfortable emotionally than hearing things that disrupt our comfort zone. This is of great concern because self-deception carries over into how we perceive ourselves and with whom we interact. And this is of great concern, especially for us, because self-deception interferes with our spiritual growth and the quality of our character.

Please turn with me to Romans 8. Let us begin by analyzing the mindset of unbelievers or the unconverted. Since our thought processes are what we are, what is the concern of unbelievers?

Romans 8:5-7 For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.

The Greek word that expresses thought processes is translated mindset. It is used as the noun mind in verses 6 and 7, for example, in carnally minded, and as the verb form to think, to be of opinion, implying manner of thinking

in verse 5. In other passages, it is translated high-minded or think of himself more highly than he ought to think. What verse 5 declares is that those whose thought processes are according to the flesh are acting naturally because they are according to the flesh. One walks according to what he thinks and he thinks what he is. There is no conflict between what he does and where he goes and what he thinks, as there is no conflict between what he does and what he is. You are what you do because it comes from the mind, from your mindset.

Turn with me to Matthew 27. Now, the concern of unbelievers is not what they are, but how far they can go and get away with it. The Greek verb which indicates the unbelievers concern for actions is translated "to care afterwards," to regret or remorseful in the New King James. And although it is translated repent in verse 3 of Matthew 27 in the King James version in the case of Judas, it is not repent but regret or remorse.

Matthew 27:3-5 Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful [that is, regretful] and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." And they said, "What is that to us? You see to it!" And then he threw down the pieces of silver in the temple and departed, and went and hanged himself.

The Greek word for repent used elsewhere means to change one's mind because there has come about a simultaneously change of the sinful nature and state of the individual. Judas *never* repented. He simply regretted what he did and he was never converted by repenting and believing.

So unbelievers walk according to the flesh because they are sinners as a way of life. And as long as they are sinners as a lifestyle, they cannot help but constantly think about how they can gratify their flesh. This mindset lives a life of illusion and they live a life that is a lie. And we are seeing that more so now than we have ever seen it in our lifetimes. A person does something and others react. A person says something and something else happens. This was of course true in the time of Jesus Christ. For instance, in the second chapter of John's gospel, there are three sets of actions by Jesus, each of which produce a distinct reaction.

At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus had turned water into wine at the marriage feast at Cana. Not many knew of this miracle, but we are told that the disciples who did know of it believed in Him, and this was the first reaction. The second reaction, as an example, is that a few days later, Jesus drove the money changers from the Temple in Jerusalem and this was a sign too. Nevertheless, the rulers of the people reacted to Him in anger, demanding, "What miraculous sign can You show us to prove Your authority to do all this?" And then the third example, we are told that when Jesus was at the Feast, He did further miracles with the result that many more believed in His name.

Now turn with me to John 2. Here were three levels of response to Jesus and His actions, ranging from the total disbelief of the leaders, to the partially informed faith of the first disciples. So who could Jesus trust? It is therefore somewhat of a shock to come to the end of chapter 2 and find, despite the obvious differences between these various groups of people that seem so significant to us, that Jesus did not trust *anyone*.

John 2:23-25 [under the heading of The Discerner of Hearts] Now when He was in Jerusalem at the Passover [it is the Passover season], during the feast, many believed in His name when they saw the signs which He did. But Jesus did not commit Himself to them, because He knew all men, and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man.

The Greek tells us plainly that although many trusted in Him, He did not trust in them. And the reason why He did not trust in them was that He knew what was in them.

What does God see when He investigates the heart of man? If we were to answer this question accurately, we must recognize first that only God can see into our hearts, and consequently the picture He paints will naturally be different from what we might expect to find there. We should not be surprised at our own inability to see into man's true nature, because this is demonstrated for us almost every day. People cannot see into the minds of other people. Only God can do that. And He searches our hearts and knows the hearts and consequently we must not be surprised if His view of the hearts and minds of people differs from our own.

The 19th century American writer, publisher, artist, philosopher Albert Hubbard said, "Many a man's reputation would not know his character if they met on the street." Meaning that people live in illusion. And when we investigate the human heart apart from the magnification of the heart provided by the Word of God, all we see is the illusion of human "goodness" with perhaps a few small smudges of what the Bible calls sin. God has the heart of man in focus, with the result that He is never fooled by human goodness.

An illusion is a deception to give an impression of reality. In developing our personalities, we have all resorted to some illusion to disguise unwanted scenes and make others like something that we are not.

What, then, does God see when He investigates the heart of man? The answer is shocking to those who are not familiar with Scripture. The Bible tells us that according to God, the heart is filled with insanity, mischief, and evil. It is impenitent, dark, hard, proud, blind, filled with lust. It is far from God. In Jeremiah 17:9, God says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" It is a grim picture, but it is only as we begin to see the heart as God sees it, that we can begin to appreciate the *greatness* of God's love.

Let us shift gears here to look at an extreme case illustrating that we act according to how we think. Classical Greek and Roman cultures had a particular aversion to pride, stigmatizing it as hubris. You have heard that word before. It has been used by the politicians often over the last year or two. Hubris, which often indicates a loss of contact with reality, an over-estimation of one's own competence and capabilities. They made almost all their literary strategies, that is, the Romans and Greeks, a variation on the theme of self-destructive effects of pride and its offensiveness to the gods. So even those worldly cultures recognized through observation and experience that pride is not good for society or the individual.

When individuals in our society become excessively preoccupied with issues of personal adequacy and power and prestige and pride and vanity, they are

labeled narcissist. Narcissism is human nature on steroids. Even psychiatrists recognize through observation and secular reasoning that narcissists are extremely self-centered, self-deceived, and self-exalted.

In going through this from here, I want you to know that I do not suggest that anyone in God's church is a narcissist. It is a way of life. And I want you to know where I am coming from on this. I am using an extreme example, but the fear is that some of us may have a tendency or two of what a narcissist does and that is some of what we will look at to help us to be able to evaluate ourselves.

Pride in the Bible brings disgrace, breeds quarrels, goes before destruction, and brings humiliation. Pride leads to self-destruction.

An infamous person who brazenly flaunted his power and wealth was the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, who erected a gold statue of himself and required his subjects to bow down to it, and as he walked on the roof of his palace, said (you are very familiar with the statement), "Is not this Babylon that *I* have built for a royal dwelling by *my* mighty power and for the honor of *my* majesty." Now, that was a narcissist at that point. His statement reeks of self-admiration.

The most certain result of pride in Scripture is that it precedes a downfall. And the story of Nebuchadnezzar runs true to form. Immediately after voicing his boast, he was stricken with insanity and his kingdom was taken from him. He had an arrogantly distorted view of himself. Hopefully there was some repentance, and true repentance there, and not just regret or remorse.

Another narcissist is described in Acts 12:23, where we read of Herod, who flaunted his royal status, prompting the people to shout, "The voice of a God and not of a man!" As a result of which an angel of God infested him with worms and he died. Narcissists beware. God will bring you down, and I speak to the world and not to the church with that statement.

Narcissism is a major character flaw in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others.

Another example of pride is the infamously pompous Haman in the book of Esther. He erupts with pride and plots revenge when his personal enemy, Mordecai, refuses to bow down and tremble before him. And when the king desires to honor someone, Haman says to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" He accordingly proceeds to prescribe a pretentious show of glory for himself. As elsewhere in the Bible, though, this pride goes before destruction as Haman is forced to lavish his display of glory on his enemy Mordecai, resulting in his own humiliation and disgrace. And eventually the proud rogue is hanged on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai.

Please turn over to Isaiah 2. Morally the most common manifestation of pride is oppression of less advantaged people. Spiritually its root sin is disregard for God or defiance of Him. The leading self-delusion of the proud is their false security in themselves and their own resources. And the most important thing about the proud is that God opposes them and the most predictable thing we know about pride is that God will bring it down, as I showed earlier.

Isaiah 2:12 For the day of the Lord of hosts shall come upon everything proud and lofty, upon everything lifted up—and it shall be brought low.

Isaiah 2:17 The loftiness of man shall be bowed down, and the haughtiness of men shall be brought low; the Lord alone will be exalted in that day, but the idols He shall utterly abolish.

Pride in the Bible is always on the verge of being reduced to nothing and eventually humbled.

Now the self-exalted person despises authority and is incapable of collaboration, true collaboration, and that is why he inevitably seeks a position of authority, even in a religious context. Some will most certainly come into conflict with the teaching authority of the church because he has a need to defy authority and he refuses to be measured by anything larger than

himself, even God. The narcissist is initially religious in trying to understand his own uniqueness. In his own mind he is a chosen disciple by virtue of a special quality in him and not really by virtue of the mercy and love of God.

He is incapable of genuine humility and worship of what is larger than himself and so God is eventually devalued because God does not remain a source of narcissistic supply for very long. The illusion that pride requires cannot be sustained and the bubble of narcissism is always at risk of bursting. It must be fed because it is an extreme case of human nature on steroids. But despite appearances, religious narcissists personally find that law is an infuriating nuisance that unnecessarily limits their sources of narcissistic supply. They draw this supply from the entire secular world and they tend to be compromising liberals (but not always liberals), watering down the seemingly difficult truth to be more inviting and inclusive.

With a large enough number of people at hand, clever narcissists can find fragments of their own vision in some of the ideas of others. Upon close observation, you notice how they collect those very pieces and assemble them into a vision which everyone else thinks were the result of their own input. But the final product in no way will have differed significantly from what he had decided originally before consulting anyone.

The religious narcissist will especially identify with certain biblical imagery such as the Good Shepherd, which depicts a human person amidst irrational animals of an inferior nature. The Parable of the Talents lends itself very well to the narcissist's twisted mind. In this parable, some servants are given five talents, another two, to a third, only one, each in proportion to his ability. The narcissist, of course, sees himself as a "ten" and everyone else as a two or one. Only those whom he needs and who supply him with fuel qualify as a ten. But these may quickly find themselves reduced to a two or a one if their status as supplier to the narcissist's ego suddenly changes.

Such a parable can become a useful tool of manipulation and flattery for the narcissist. The narcissist's use of Scripture is as twisted as Satan's in the temptation in the wilderness. I am not saying they are, but sometimes you wonder about these televangelists and the way they present things and that type of thing, if they are not at least infected with some narcissism. I am not going to judge them any more harshly than that.

There have been several false norms that have been made popular over the years that have only made it easier for the depraved and the pathological narcissist to continue undetected. The popular exhortation to be tolerant, positive, nonjudgmental, and inclusive are prime examples, and this is what mainstream Christianity has been emphasizing for many decades. The biblical precept not to judge is not and has never been an unqualified and absolute norm, as if making judgments were instinctively evil. Rather, the biblical norm is qualified by the context in which we find it.

Matthew 7:4-5 "Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye? Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye."

The scripture does not assert that all of us have planks in our eyes that we are forever unable to remove, thus barring us from ever having to judge that someone might have a splinter in his. The norm bears upon the hypocrisy of the morally blind passing judgment on someone much better off morally and spiritually. It is not a precept against making judgments because, as the apostle Paul says in I Corinthians 2:15, "But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one." Scripture is filled with examples of negative judgments.

Now, the narcissist is forever scheming to create a safe environment, primarily for himself, and so what could better serve him than to be surrounded by people who are wrongly committed to an unqualified refusal to make judgments. That is total tolerance of anything, and that is what we see in our society today. That is why it has been so easy for narcissists to explode, not only in numbers, but in power.

We must commit to overcoming sin because unrepentant sin can lead to becoming permissive under the guise of being tolerant and forgiving. But the permissive are not forgiving, only indifferent. The unrepentant excuse themselves and are motivated by an unconscious desire to be excused by others. They do not ask for forgiveness because it implies confession and contrition. They will eagerly excuse the faults and failings of others,

encouraging them to do the same, and as the commonality of narcissism increases at the end time—for men will be lovers of themselves—the widespread approval of tolerance for sin, but not moral living, is touted as the perfection of social justice.

But tolerance is not necessarily a virtue because there is a great deal that love refuses to tolerate. The commandments are love and it tolerates very strongly and very firmly those ten things in there. That is the letter of the law and beyond that, the spirit of law that goes into hate and lusting.

The narcissist cannot help but defy authority and if he is highly intelligent, his descent will be subtle and covert. He will be loved by the majority for his progressive and compassionate attitude, but he cannot afford to be too overt in his selfishness. There is no neutral walk when it comes to God's truth. Those who walk according to the flesh follow their own sinful nature. They succumb to their own natural instincts and they do what they do because they are what they are—deceived.

I John 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

The apostle Paul warns us not to be deceived into thinking that the wisdom of this age, this human age, is sufficient for obtaining salvation and for building up the church of God. Instead of thinking of ourselves as wise by this world's standards, we must renounce dependence on this human wisdom to receive God's wisdom. The two forms of wisdom do not mix because the world's form of wisdom contains lies and all you have to do is look at the "wisdom" that is being produced on the mainstream media of what is the truth about disease and employment and borders and so on.

I Corinthians 3:18-20 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the [I will call it worldly] wise, that they are futile."

A false philosophy is the most fruitful source of self-deception in the field of religion. This is the way it was with the Corinthians and this is the way it has been down through all the ages since. Now, we may avoid self-deception by evaluating where our trust lies and whether we are gullible in what we believe that comes from this godless culture in which we live. We must realize that the wisdom of this world reflects the mind of Satan and his foolishness in God's sight.

The Bible contains stories of people who were easily tricked and taken advantage of. And we have several other terms for this undesirable circumstance: deceived, conned, hoodwinked, swindled, duped. In the Bible, most were the object of a justified prank but occasionally there is a terrible underlying circumstance.

Eve is the original dupe in the Bible. Too easily swayed by the temptation of the serpent when she should have remained obedient to the command from God, her sin, in part, was gullibility, a root trait of the deceived. It is a character weakness to be deceived, and it particularly comes upon us when we are not watchful. Abel, Esau, Jacob, Joseph's brothers, Judah, Joshua, Samson, David, and several other Bible characters were all duped. If there is a lesson to be learned from the relative prominence of the dupe in the Bible, it is the need for watchfulness.

The price of allowing oneself to be deceived or tricked can be as seemingly minor as the thwarting of one's plans to as devastating as the loss of one's life.

God reduces evil biblical characters to the status of dupe as part of His judgment against them. Pharaoh Eglon, Sisera, Herod all come to mind, and there are others. In one way or another some people become skilled illusionists, who can make dupes of large numbers of people. The news media is a prime example of large organizations of talking head illusionists and deceivers whose livelihood is based on making dupes of those that they have condemned as the despicable and the useless eaters.

We are called to overcome our human nature and to flee from the fake and unreal of our previous worldly lives. It is very hard to do that if we continue to listen to these lies of mainstream media and those types of things, because

if you tell a lie enough, it begins to be believed as truth. (There are several people who have been credited with that statement and I will not bother to try to figure out which one it is.)

If we consider ourselves true Christians, our lives have a vital purpose and they must be used for that purpose, that is, to build character like Jesus Christ. A Christian life is a time of reality building and there is no room for the pretense and false fronts of the illusion that we so carefully built to obscure the truth when we were unbelievers. God has promised to rebuild us until we have holy, righteous character. He has personally made us His own special people and He has not promised us a convincing illusion. What He has promised us is more real than physical life itself.

Ephesians 4:13-15 . . . till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect [or complete] man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.

So people who are wrapped up in the popular culture and who spend all their time in a fantasy world, become so accustomed to lying and deceit that they no longer seem to be able to distinguish truth from lies or right from wrong. Take one look at the world's politicians and you see this degeneration. Take another look at those who vote for the far Left's destructive issues of murdering children (abortion), social justice (communism), and shutting down free speech (censorship of truth). Many actors and movie stars have deluded themselves, accelerated by the illusion they portray, through the character they absorb in their acting. They depict and promote immoral and demented personas that are adulterers, fornicators, drunkards, murderers, and evil behaviors.

Throughout history even whole cities have tried to give the illusion of a progressive, tolerant, and advanced people. They have come to represent their lifestyles as cities of perversions. San Francisco today is known as a haven of degenerates. During the time of the apostles, the city of Corinth was like that. Corinth was a seaport and because of its position had become rich

through trade, and the people of many nations converged on this city and mingled freely. Therefore, the city became a byword for the immoral way of life—to corinthianize became a synonym for an immoral lifestyle. So maybe we should say to San Francisco-ize or to New York-ize or to Washington-ize.

This attitude permeated Corinthian society and even affected the members of the church of God that the apostle Paul had raised up there. They became so liberal and tolerant in their thinking that when a member of the church became involved in an incestuous relationship with his stepmother, the other members were not shocked and seemed openly proud of the level of their tolerance. Paul wrote those brethren a stern letter. He was horrified that God's chosen people in Corinth had become so tolerant of the situation that would have appalled relatively decent, unconverted people elsewhere. Paul credits their intellectual pride and vanity for thinking too highly of themselves.

I Corinthians 5:1-2 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

So Paul confronted them with their tolerant attitude toward serious sin and the hypocritical illusion they portrayed as Christians. He commanded the Corinthians to disfellowship the sinning member until such a time as he learned his lesson and hopefully repented. This was not just a fit of prudishness on Paul's part. He knew that if this lackadaisical approach to immorality continued, it would not be long before the entire church was infected, either slightly or to some greater degree. Even the world understands that a rotten apple will spoil the whole bushel and they have learned that from experience and opening their eyes.

Paul used another analogy, one that was easily understood by the Corinthians.

I Corinthians 5:6-8 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you are truly unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Paul used the simple analogy of the action of a leavening agent in breadmaking to show the effect of sin in the Christian life. And as the Days of Unleavened Bread come up, we are deleavening our homes and it is amazing, just in the general observation, that it seems that those who really do a good thorough job of deleavening are also deleavening their own lives spiritually, and those who are lackadaisical about it, it is amazing because it carries over because they seem lackadaisical in their own lives spiritually. So do not underestimate the value of the worth of what God has commanded us to do by deleavening our homes.

Now this incident not only served to teach the Corinthian church a lesson in humility that the presumptuousness—the arrogance—of the tolerance of sin was not acceptable among God's people, but that this was also a test of their character. They initially failed this test, but they eventually passed, as God, using Paul, worked with them. It was also a test for Paul to see if he would uphold God's instructions for dealing with flagrant sin and behavior that would eventually be harmful to the church. Giving the illusion of obeying God is a far cry from the Christian character that is necessary for God's completion of us. God continually tests us to see where we stand, to see if our beliefs are preferences or convictions. It also tells us where we are weak or strong in our own character, so that we may overcome our weaknesses.

The Bible's thoroughgoing realism helps us to understand that our essential identity consists of our responses to the events that make up our lives as we live them in the world.

After we successfully endure a spiritual trial, we always emerge in hope. Our hope never proves to be an illusion because it is founded on the love of God. Christian character displayed outwardly is never an illusion. It is always genuine and true, and a good witness of God's way of life.

In contrast to unbelievers who revel in moral lawlessness, true believers delight in the law of God. The psalmist writes of the value of God's law in Psalm 119:72, "The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of coins of gold and silver."

The mindset of believers is set on spiritual things. The believer becomes a partaker of God's nature. On the other hand, a spiritual lifestyle is as impossible for an unbeliever as it is for a wild beast to be domesticated.

II Peter 1:2-4 Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

The promises the apostle Peter refers to are those which relate to the salvation of the people of God. They are called exceedingly great and precious because of their value in supporting and comforting our hearts and minds, and of the honor and joy they reveal to us. These promises are made in connection with the plan of salvation revealed in the gospel, and they refer to the pardon of sin, strength, comfort, support in trial, a glorious resurrection, and joy of eternal life.

Now, if we look at the greatness and glory of the specific promises, we see that the promises are certainly exceedingly precious, or if we look at their influence in supporting and elevating our hearts and minds, we will have a good idea of their worth. The promise goes beyond our reasoning ability; it enters an area which is almost impossible for us to comprehend—eternal life.

This world would be unbearable without God's promises, and we do not find hope by looking at the past. Even the former joys and anticipations cannot provide comfort. Today may be painful and sad and disappointing. If you are in the midst of a trial, maybe the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel

seems to have gone out. But the future God promises opens up opportunities and hope and joy in our anticipation of God's will being accomplished and all His promises being fulfilled.

When cut off from God's promises, we have no way either of obtaining the blessings which we desire or of discovering that they can be ours. The promises of God provides unwavering confidence to withstand the trials of life. A person may claim to be saved, but if his lifestyle remains unchanged, therefore his claim is false and deceptive, as he lives in illusion.

I Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

So as converted members of God's church we were washed. That is, we were spiritually cleansed by God, an act symbolized by baptism. We were sanctified. That is, set apart as holy by God. And we were justified, showing God's act as judge in declaring us righteous because of Christ. Paul says all this was done by God for us on the authority (in the name of) Jesus Christ by means of God's Spirit.

We have repented of our sins and accepted Jesus Christ as our Savior. Our mindset is not that of conformity to the flesh, in which sin never ceases to dwell. But our mindset is in opposition to sin and true repentance is what we desire.

Romans 7:20-22 Now if I do what I will not to do, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. I find then a law, that evil is present with me, the one who wills to do good. For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

True believers do not live a sinful lifestyle. However, we do sin occasionally and we must repent of it and overcome it.

We love keeping God's law, but the world hates even the thought of it and that is why they are in the process of passing that bill. It is called the equality bill (or something like that), that takes away free speech and especially the rights of Christianity. That is the fruit coming from this present administration. And it will not get any better unless God intervenes, which we should be praying for. So it is no surprise that their whole way of life, their life's motivation is continuous sin.

Now we have an aversion to yielding to the flesh, but for us to have this mindset, we must first truly repent from sin. The believer experiences repentance unto salvation which is followed by the baptism of repentance. This is what Peter said in Acts 2.

Acts 2:38-39 Then Peter said to them, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord God will call."

It shows right there that it is God who calls people into His church. We cannot. We do not bring anybody into the church. God calls them. We just do God's work by presenting it, making it available openly. These words came to Peter's audience as the best news they had ever heard—far better than they deserved or could have hoped for. So today, these words remain the best of good news and are a proclamation of that good news for the ages. We find Jesus Christ's first command in Mark 1.

Mark 1:14-15 Now after John was put into prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."

Repent here implies the initial repentance under salvation and consequent acts of repentance for sin by faith, which the apostle John calls overcoming. By faith, we now have access to what was once accomplished by and through the appearance of Jesus on earth.

I John 5:4-5 Whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

The victory over the world is gained as a progression. It begins with the new birth, the beginning act of God, and it moves on to the believers experience and act of faith. It culminates in the acceptance that Jesus is the Son of God. The victory requires the whole process.

So the spiritual mindset of a believer is one of constant faith consequent to the repentance unto salvation in the gospel. The true test of our spiritual character and our right standing with God is that we bear good fruit, not the illusion of fruit as a narcissist would. True Christians do not live illusions. We have the truth, and with the truth comes reality. The way we perceive ourselves and those around us reflects our spiritual character. God spends our lives training us and revealing to us what we are really like. He lets us know where we stand in relation to Him by constantly testing our spiritual character. The best test for our character is our spiritual fruits—how we live, what we say, what we do. It involves the totality of our being.

Earlier, I described general narcissism to give you an illustration of the contrast between the mindset of the sinful unbeliever and the mindset of the righteous believer. Now let us consider what else God expects from us. Humility is perhaps one of the most elusive of all godly characteristics. Most of us easily notice pride in people, but genuine humility is not easy to see because humility, like love, does not parade itself and is offered in a spirit of respect and submission. In the brash and insolent world humility, like meekness, is viewed as weakness. And since humility is a condition of the heart, it can be faked or imitated overtly. God can see camouflaged pride or silent humility of the heart, whereas people see mainly what appears on the surface and therefore a prideful person of the heart can appear humble overtly.

Notice the example Jesus set. Since humility reflects godly character, Jesus is the epitome of humility. He not only strongly impressed upon His disciples the need to have humility, but was in Himself its personification. Jesus knew that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He

came forth from God and would go back again to God, and still His incomparable superiority over human beings did not influence His desire to serve.

Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

He was so meek and lowly in heart and so humble in spirit and ready for service, that He girded Himself with a towel and washed the disciples feet. Humility leads the strong to serve the weak. It never underestimates its own worth, but in unreserved selflessness, it is ready to sacrifice its own needs at any moment for the good of others.

John 13:3-15 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are You washing my feet?" And Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this." Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." For He knew who would betray Him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean." So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you."

As we see in this example, humility loses all its self-conceit, but never loses its self-respect. And this is consistent with upholding one's personal dignity and integrity of character, Jesus was and is and will always be the greatest dignity. Yet He humbled Himself to become a man. He made Himself of no reputation. He did not come to be ministered to but to minister. He was the servant of all. And He never forgot that dignity of His. When Pilate asked Him if he were king, He answered that He was. He stood in kingly majesty before the mob and in kingly serenity before the magistrates. He hung as king on the stake, yet He was never contemptuous. He never forgot His humility because it is an integral part of His godly character.

Jesus was made in the likeness of man and was found in manner as a man after being divine and powerful. In sharp contrast, this is something Satan, the ultimate narcissist, would never do.

Philippians 2:5-8 [the heading for this section of Scripture is The Humbled and Exalted Christ] Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.

Jesus' perfect example throughout His life is what Paul admonishes the Philippian members to develop within themselves. Christ did not attempt to please Himself, but put the needs and feelings of others above His own. Romans 15:2-3 says, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself." Repeatedly, Christ demonstrated an attitude of service toward everyone around Him. He showed lovingkindness to the poor and oppressed. He was concerned for publicans and sinners. He took a personal interest in little children. In this way He showed His concern was outgoing for all classes of people and all age groups. Jesus even had concern for the thief on the stake while He Himself was dying. He remained humbled through thick and thin and lived His life as a lowly servant.

God has called us out of this world not only to repent of our sins, but also to repent of what we are by nature—self-seeking and self-centered people. Developing true humility requires that we turn to Him with all our hearts so that He can infuse us with the mind and nature of His Son Jesus Christ and Himself. God wants us to lose our sense of selfishness and replace it with an attitude of wanting to see and help others to grow, advance, and prosper. This new disposition begins with faith, submission, and obedience.

Jesus obeyed even when obedience ended in death. The point of the expression in Philippians 2:8, "obedient to the point of death" is this: We may willingly and even with pleasure obey another where there is no specific risk. But it is another story when obedience is in the face of fatal danger. *It is inadequate to speak of Jesus' death primarily as an example.* This is misleading unless the description is coupled with a recognition that Jesus died for others as our Sin-bearer and that He is our example only because He is first and foremost our Savior and Lord.

Jesus died to remove sin. He removed it by bearing its penalty Himself. In the way of an analogy, a man who is drowning in the ocean may wish that he had taken swimming lessons, and he may take them someday, but before he takes them, before he gets his example, he first needs a lifeguard. In the same way, Christ must be our Savior before He can be our example. How else are we going to believe Him or believe in Him. The sufferings of Christ do have great value as an example. The sufferings of Jesus are an example for us of humility and of obedience to the will of God.

In I Peter, the patient endurance of Jesus is given as an example to those who are suffering. Peter writes in I Peter 2:21 that they were called to suffer patiently adding that "Christ suffered for you, leaving us an example." The New Testament never forgets the unbridgeable gulf that exists between the suffering Christ and human suffering. Christ suffered innocently and this cannot be said in the same way even of the most innocent person. The meaning of Christ's sufferings is far greater than that He is our example. Jesus Christ died to remove our sin. He died to satisfy divine justice. He died to reveal God's love.

In every decision we make, we either do God's will or we do our own fleshly will. There is a constant conflict between the two opposing forces. Paul

warns us in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."

So whenever we do our own will, we exalt ourselves because God tells us to do the opposite of what our fleshly wills dictate. But when we exalt God and His will, we subjugate our own self-will. The battle has been illustrated using a seesaw comparison. Our fleshly will is one on one end and God's will is on the other. And because they are opposites, when one is exalted, the other is subjugated. If we exalt God and His ways in our lives by obeying His laws and fulfilling His will, then our self-will will be humbled.

We are required to seek by both careful examination and constant effort so that we may understand our responsibility and perform our duty. Humility is something we grow in by degrees.

Zephaniah 2:3 Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice. Seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger.

I do not know if that is referring to the place of safety or just you personally will be hidden from something. But either way it is really a fine promise that he gives us that He will do that. But if you will notice there he does not give us an absolute because we know that there will be martyrs, and there have been martyrs, and He needs those martyrs. And so He does not promise to hide everyone. But if we are faithful to God, He will put us in that category of being hidden. Whether he decides we are going to be a martyr or not is according to His will.

The humble are described by Zephaniah as those who do God's righteous will. That is, who seek diligently to fulfill what God has commanded as right. In this light, seeking the Lord is explained as seeking righteousness and humility. Do you want to know how to seek? The Lord tells you right here. Seek righteousness and seek humility is part of it. We seek a relationship with God, but it is necessary that we seek righteousness and humility.

The virtue of humility includes the sense of obligation because of all that has been given to us and of the heartfelt recognition of our inadequacies in the proper and effective use of those gifts which we cannot even praise ourselves for having used well. Humility is found in the alliance between realistic self-respect, based on truth, and dedicated self-sacrifice and service. A person who knows his own gifts and abilities, and yet is willing to serve those who have nothing with which to offer in return, is showing humility.

Our part in the process of salvation is a mere shadow compared to what God provides. And no doubt those who are sincerely striving to live righteous lives have a difficult walk, but it is not without divine help. We count the cost in our faithful decision to be baptized and we find the cost on our own part is our own lives in complete devotion to and sacrifice for God and His Son and His church and His way of life. We are constantly humbled by our failures and must repeatedly go to God through Jesus Christ for forgiveness and strength and encouragement.

The humble are those who willingly obey and submit to God's pleasure and will, rather than proudly insisting on satisfying their own desires. God will never leave or forsake the humble. The apostle James advises us, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord and He will lift you up." The apostle Peter instructs us, "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him for He cares for you."

If we want to avoid being brought low by God, we must be working at overcoming our self-centered tendencies on a daily basis, always monitoring our motivations—judging our own thoughts and actions before God must step in and unpleasantly correct the problem. Although we should be doing this throughout the year, we must be even more diligent to analyze and evaluate ourselves as we approach Passover.

In considering this battle in which we are neck deep, it would be wise for us to examine our lives daily to make sure that we are connected to God the Father through Jesus Christ in a vital relationship of love, so that we will have the constant spiritual strength to produce the spiritually character-rich fruit of the Spirit God desires.

May God help us examine ourselves more thoroughly as we approach
Passover!

Through self-examination and self-judgment, we prepare heart and mind for
having the right perspective and focus. Like Jesus Christ, the humble are not
here to be served, but to serve.

To worthily observe Passover, we must recognize and admit the true depth of
our own sin. Our focus must be on the payment for our sins—the willing
sacrifice unto death that our sinless Savior Jesus Christ made for each and
every one of us personally.

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Jesus Christ. . . . He humbled
Himself and became obedient to the point of death."