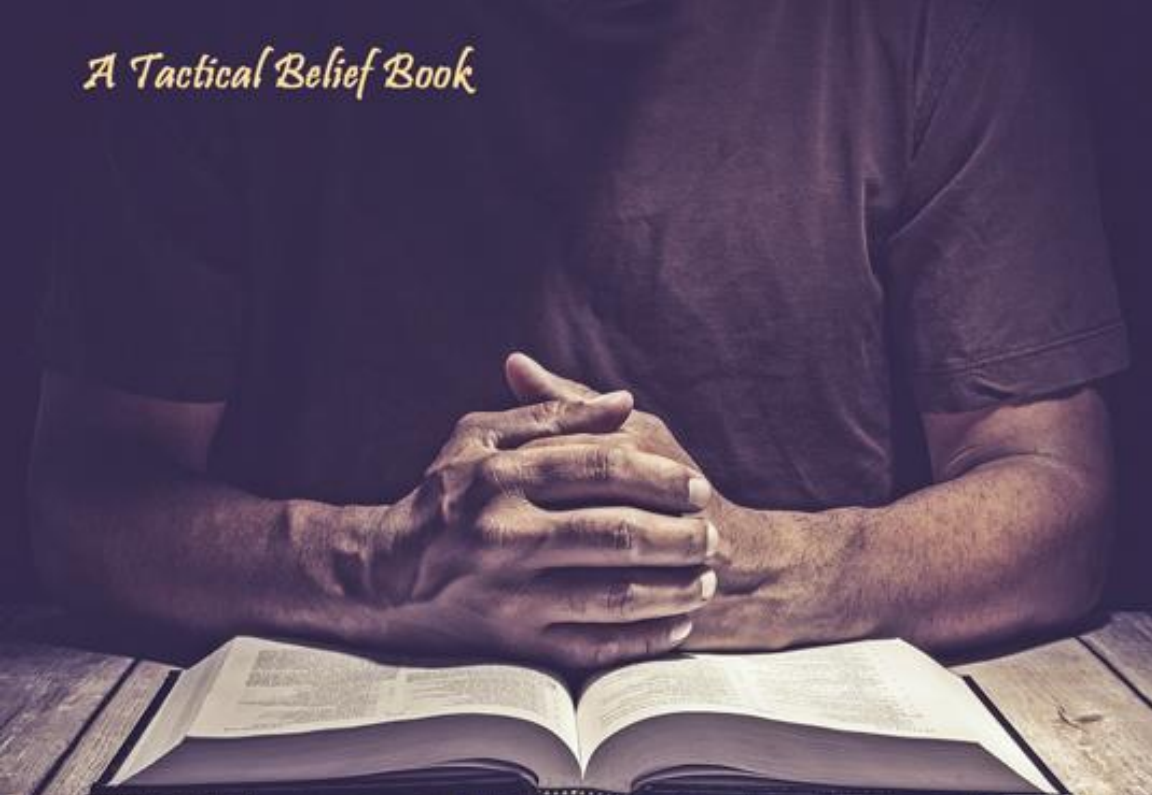


A Tactical Belief Book

A photograph showing a person's hands clasped together over an open book, which is lying flat on a wooden table. The person is wearing a dark t-shirt. The lighting is dramatic, with the hands and book in the center being brightly lit against a dark background.

GETTING CHRISTIANITY RIGHT

Finding the Balance We All Need

R. Herbert

**GETTING
CHRISTIANITY
RIGHT**

Finding the Balance We All Need

By R. Herbert

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INTRODUCTION: A MATTER OF BALANCE

Have you ever experienced a balance disorder? If you have, or ever do, you will know how problematic they can be. Losing one's balance while standing, walking or in other activities can be caused by certain medications and by a number of physical problems – but whatever the cause, the end results are usually the same. Balance disorders can be profoundly disorienting, cause psychological and emotional problems, and can eventually lead to falls and injuries.

Loss of spiritual balance is no different and can also lead to harm to ourselves or others. The apostle Peter warned of this when he wrote “My dear friends ... don't let the errors of evil people lead you down the wrong path and make you lose your balance” (2 Peter 3:17 CEV). The Christian life that is unbalanced is diminished in its ability to serve others and to be a light to them. It is also diminished in its ability to walk closely with God and to enjoy our relationship with him as we should.

So balance is as important in our spiritual lives as it is in our physical existence. God is a God of balance, as we will frequently see in this book, and he rebukes his children when they are not rightly balanced – calling them, for example, “a cake not turned” (Hosea 7:8 ESV) which is a figurative way of saying “not balanced.” The cake is burned on one side, and uncooked on the other! He wants us to avoid the problems that come when we lose spiritual balance and stability – whether it is something as fundamental as not making time in our lives to devote to our families and God himself, or hurting ourselves and others through misunderstanding and misapplying the Bible's teachings.

But attaining and maintaining balance is not always as straightforward as we might think. While we usually become aware quite quickly if we lose our physical balance, spiritually it may not be so easy. We may not even be aware that we are losing balance,

especially if we are misunderstanding or misapplying spiritual principles. That is the reason for this book, which was written to help you to recognize where balance is needed and should be applied in your own situation. It is a book about how we live Christianity – not primarily about Christian doctrine and beliefs. Some aspects of doctrine will necessarily be discussed, but always in the context of our practical application of the Bible.

In our Christian lives we continually come face to face with moral choices, options, and possibilities. In some cases, we must simply choose between two extremes – one obviously right and the other wrong. But it is not always that simple. Perhaps we face decisions involving choosing one of multiple options, or we struggle to find balance in situations where both ends of the spectrum of possibilities seem to make sense. That is where this book comes in.

Getting Christianity Right looks at some of the most common and often difficult areas in which we must find and maintain Christian balance. The book does not address clear-cut areas of wrongdoing such as the use of recreational drugs or cheating on taxes. Rather it looks at commonly encountered “grey areas” where we must find balance. Even here the book does not attempt to be complete, but hopefully the examples it discusses will convey the idea that God’s way of life is one of balance and should not be one that hurts us or others through a well-meaning but potentially dangerous lack of understanding. When we grow in balance, our Christian lives become more peaceful, happy, and “together.” We also become better stabilizing lights for others in an unbalanced world, and most of all, we become more like God himself.

1. ALCOHOL: TO BE AVOIDED OR USED CAREFULLY?

Although it is not as common a view as it once was, many religious people – and even whole denominations – feel that it is wrong to drink alcohol. These people base their understanding on certain scriptures, while many others believe that the proper use of alcoholic beverages is shown to be allowable by other scriptures. What does the Bible actually teach?

To Be Avoided?

The Bible contains numerous scriptures showing the misuse of alcohol is wrong and can lead to serious evils – the least of which is the clouding of the judgement of those who drink heavily (Proverbs 31:4–5; Isaiah 28:7–8; etc.). It shows that even unintentional overindulgence can result in sin (Genesis 9:20–22) and that alcohol can be used maliciously to lure people into sinful behavior (Genesis 19:30–38; Habakkuk 2:15). Proverbs 20:1 tells us that “Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.” Proverbs 23:29–35 is even more explicit.

The prophet Isaiah gives a similar warning: “Woe to those who rise early in the morning to run after their drinks, who stay up late at night till they are inflamed with wine ... Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine and champions at mixing drinks” (Isaiah 5:11, 22). The New Testament shows Christians are to avoid drunkenness (Ephesians 5:18), and that no drunkard will enter the kingdom of heaven (1 Corinthians 6:10; Galatians 5:21).

But in all the above cases alcohol is not biblically forbidden – the scriptures simply warn of its misuse. The only times when the Bible actually forbids the use of alcohol are special religious circumstances: when the priests were serving in the sanctuary

(Leviticus 10:9), and when individuals took the Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:3; Judges 13:4; etc.). In other cases, when it is stated that alcohol was not drunk, it was because of the particular circumstances of the occasion or time – as when Israel was in the wilderness forty years and alcohol was not available to them (Deuteronomy 29:6). So the Bible clearly shows the evils inherent in the misuse of alcohol, but it nowhere forbids its carefully controlled use in proper circumstances.

To Be Used Carefully

Scripture not only does not forbid a Christian from drinking alcohol, but also shows its controlled use in positive terms. Psalm 104:15 states that God gives wine “that gladdens human hearts.” And Ecclesiastes 9:7 encourages us “Drink your wine with a joyful heart.” In fact, the prophet Amos speaks of drinking wine from one’s own vineyard as a sign of God’s blessing (Amos 9:13–14).

The New Testament also gives a positive view of wine as well as warning of its misuse. Jesus not only turned water into wine for an appropriate festive occasion (John 2:1-11), but also used wine as an emblem of his blood in the Last Supper (Luke 22:17), and said he would drink it again later, in the kingdom (Luke 22:18).

Some argue that “the fruit of the vine” Jesus used may have been unfermented grape juice, but while this is possible there is no scriptural evidence that he did not use wine or that there would have been anything wrong with doing so. Had Jesus felt drinking wine was a problem he would doubtless have made it clear to his disciples when he instituted the emblem of the cup. Likewise, Paul, in discussing the Lord’s Supper, does not indicate that he is talking about anything but wine (1 Corinthians 11:26) and he explicitly told Timothy to take a little wine for his stomach’s sake (1 Timothy 5:23). Here, especially, Paul would have clarified that he meant unfermented grape juice had this been the case. Overall, then, the New Testament follows the principles found in the Old Testament – that any misuse of alcohol is wrong, but its careful use in

appropriate situations can be enjoyable and sometimes, in small quantities, perhaps even healthful.

Balance Regarding Alcohol

Although the Scriptures allow the restrained use of alcohol, there are several aspects of its use in which the Christian must be particularly careful. Alcohol can easily become a drug for some people and anyone who realizes that they are beginning to drink more, or considerably more often, should probably discontinue its use immediately and get professional medical advice.

Christians who recognize that they are, or may be, overly susceptible to alcohol should not feel they must take wine in order to participate in the Lord's Supper or Communion. In such cases it is perfectly appropriate for the person to use grape juice – the unfermented “fruit of the vine.” There is nothing wrong with abstaining from alcohol in any situation where this would be wise.

We must remember that we are instructed to not do anything that might offend other believers or encourage them to sin against their conscience (1 Corinthians 8:9–13). To tempt or enable drinking of any alcohol by individuals who may be alcoholic or susceptible to overdrinking is wrong. We should also be careful not to unnecessarily offend those whose consciences are sensitive on the subject, and who feel drinking is wrong for whatever reason. It is in exactly that context that Paul wrote: “whether you eat or *drink* or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks [unbelievers] or the church of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31–32).

The Bible is clear. Drunkenness and alcohol misuse are sins that must be avoided and repented of. The same is true of the use of alcohol in ways that offend others. But consumption of small quantities of alcohol in appropriate settings for those who are not negatively affected by it is a matter of Christian freedom. Nevertheless, even in such cases, maintaining proper balance is always important.

2. BIBLE STUDY: PITFALLS TO AVOID

Study of God's word* is a privilege we are all given and one that does not require formal training or rules to accomplish. If we can read, or even simply hear the words of the Scriptures, God can help us to grow in grace and understanding through them. Nevertheless, there are some mistakes that even the most well-meaning of Christians sometimes make that are avoidable through the application of balanced study. In this chapter we will look at what are perhaps the two most common errors in studying and understanding the Bible – one that often affects newer Christians, and the other that can affect even seasoned believers.

Literal and Figurative

The first problem many new believers experience in studying the Bible is confusing what is meant literally and what is simply figurative language. How are we to know which way a given passage is to be understood? This is important because many Christians have hurt themselves or others by a lack of understanding in this area, and even when no harm is done, Bible readers can become very confused about what the Scriptures say.

Usually, of course, there is no problem. We should always remember that despite all its poetry, imagery, and symbolism, the Bible contains far more text with literal significance than any other kind of meaning. So the basic rule of Bible reading is simply that we *presume the words of any biblical verse or passage should be understood in their normal "literal" way unless we have reason to look for other, deeper levels of meaning.* This means that we always read a biblical text as we would a letter from a friend or a newspaper – and that we accept the normal everyday meaning of what is said – unless we see some indication that the words may have been used figuratively or symbolically.

But that doesn't mean we get to pick and choose what we want to accept as literal. Some people attempt to do this by reading "acceptable" things literally and less appealing or more difficult statements as being figurative or symbolic. In this way, some wrongly read the Bible by not accepting events such as the virgin birth of Jesus, his miracles, or his resurrection, literally. It is better to presume that anything we read in the Bible is to be understood literally unless:

1. *The statement is using clearly figurative or poetic language.* The book of Psalms, for example, is full of poetic language such as statements speaking of God riding on the clouds (Psalm 104:3). It also often uses metaphorical language such as "break their teeth, O God" (Psalm 58:6 ASV), but "break their teeth" is simply a figurative way of saying "destroy their weapons" (compare Psalm 57:4 where men's teeth are described as spears and arrows).

2. *The statement is part of a clearly symbolic section of the Scriptures.* When we read prophetic sections of scripture, for example, we must not assume that everything said is to be taken literally – or symbolically. It may be that we need to look carefully at what is said on a verse by verse or even phrase by phrase basis. Generally speaking, however, when we read prophetic sections of Scripture regarding events in the present age (for example, the fall of Jerusalem – Luke 19:41–44), they are to be taken literally. But "apocalyptic" material regarding "end times" events (for example, the "beasts" that rise out of the sea – Revelation 13:1) should be viewed symbolically.

3. *The statement leads to an unlikely or impossible conclusion where a miracle is not involved.* For example, the Gospel of John ends with the statement that if all the deeds Jesus performed during his earthly ministry were fully recorded, the whole world could not hold the books that would be necessary to include them

(John 21:25). Clearly, statements like this are not meant to be taken literally.

4. *The statement contradicts other information which is clear.* If we find another Bible verse that clearly contradicts a literal interpretation of something we read in the Scriptures, we can presume that what we are reading is not meant to be taken literally. For example, Jesus said: “If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out” (Matthew 5:29 CSB). But we can find other scriptures clearly saying we must not cut or mutilate our bodies (Leviticus 19:28; etc.), and so Jesus’ words that we should gouge out an eye must not be meant literally – in this case, it is simply exaggeration to drive home the point that we must not let anything deprive us of our opportunity for salvation.

It is vital that we utilize all of these basic principles in reading the Bible. But if we do, we will not often be confused regarding how to view what it says.

Skim-reading and Obsession

A very different kind of problem often affects even well-established believers, and that is where we may fall into one or other of the ditches that lie on either side of balanced Bible study. On the one hand, after we have studied the Scriptures for a number of years, we may have highlighted or otherwise marked many important verses in our Bibles to make them stand out, or we may have a “red letter” Bible in which the words of Jesus are printed in red. In either case, over time it can become easy to slip into a pattern of just skipping from one “important” verse to another. There is certainly nothing wrong with doing that at times, but if it is the only way we study, we are only seeing those verses out of context and may miss much of what we can learn by looking at their wider setting. Even just reading the highlighted words of Jesus – important as they are – can miss the fact that every word of the Bible is a word of God.

A related kind of “skim-reading” is where we may read a section of Scripture in its wider context – say one or more chapters – but we allow ourselves to simply “speed read” through the material without giving ourselves time to unpack the meaning and think about personal applications of what we read.

At the other extreme, many well-meaning Christians fall into the ditch of getting interested in a particular subject, then only reading the parts of the Bible relevant to that interest. This is particularly common with the study of prophecy (see Chapter 14, “Prophecy”), which can become an obsessive interest for some and lead to a damaged sense of Christian priorities. But this can also happen with undue focus on other kinds of biblical material, and we must all keep in mind that every word of God is given for our instruction (2 Timothy 3:16).

A good balancing principle is to remember that prophetic material, for example, while it may be important, is only about twenty-five percent of the Bible. If we are spending more than twenty-five percent of our personal study time in studying prophecy each day, we have lost the balance we need in looking regularly at all the types of material God has given us for our edification. Again, this can apply to any kind of material found in the Bible. Sometimes, we may get into the habit of only reading the Gospels or the Psalms on a regular basis, and while this may certainly be profitable, it may not be as profitable as studying these books along with others. God speaks to us through all of his word, and we should always be careful to listen to everything he has to say to us.

* For more information on this topic, download the free e-book *Understanding the Bible: Three Steps to Enrich and Deepen Your Knowledge of the Scriptures* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

3. CLOTHING AND APPEARANCE: CHRISTIAN BALANCE

There is no doubt that appearance matters. Through much of human history clothing styles, materials, and other aspects of appearance have often been tied to an individual's status and roles in society – as well as their religious and other beliefs. So it is perhaps not surprising that the Bible has a good deal to say about our clothing and appearance – and shows that we can err at two extremes in this area.

Ignoring Appearances

Sincere religious individuals have sometimes understood the Scriptures in an unbalanced manner – going as far as to believe that any focus on one's appearance is wrong. Some have used the biblical figures of Elijah and John the Baptist as models in this way, but the Scriptures nowhere say these people were unkempt or dirty – just that they wore rugged or simple clothing because of their lifestyles and where they lived. This is no different from us wearing rugged work or hiking clothing in settings where it is appropriate.

In the same way, Jesus emphasized that we should not judge others “by appearances” (John 7:24), but this is regarding our not judging the actions and behavior of others rather than that he was condoning unkempt personal appearance. On the other hand, although he was relatively poor, Jesus himself wore what must have been a well-made and perhaps expensive single-piece woven robe for which the soldiers drew lots rather than cut it apart (Matthew 27:35). So, there is nothing wrong with trying to look “our best” in clothing and other areas of appearance when this is done in moderation. The apostle Paul wrote:

Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You

are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

Not taking proper care of ourselves and regularly looking unkempt can be a sign of deeper problems, but it is certainly not honoring God or letting our lights shine as examples of his way of life. Becoming excessively over- or underweight may be the result of unavoidable medical issues, but if it is within our control we should strive to honor God in this area, too.

Focusing on Appearances

At the other extreme, and more commonly, people may become obsessive about their appearance and place undue importance on it. This can range from placing too much importance on following fashion trends and concerns all the way to showing favoritism to those who appear better than others (James 2:2-4). The prophet Isaiah spoke out against the worldly focus on physical appearance and beauty of many of the Israelite women:

The women of Zion are haughty, walking along with outstretched necks, flirting with their eyes, strutting along with swaying hips, with ornaments jingling on their ankles ... the LORD will snatch away their finery: the bangles and headbands and crescent necklaces, the earrings and bracelets and veils, the headdresses and anklets and sashes, the perfume bottles and charms, the signet rings and nose rings, the fine robes and the capes and cloaks, the purses and mirrors, and the linen garments and tiaras and shawls. (Isaiah 3:16-23)

While nothing is said about any of these aids to beauty being wrong (in fact, the Bible shows examples of the right use of many of them – for example, Song of Songs 4:11), the Israelite women were clearly focusing on these things excessively and from a wrong motivation.

In the same way, acquiring excessively large amounts of clothes, shoes and other accessories of appearance is an unnecessary and undesirable activity for the Christian. We do well to remember John the Baptist's words: "The person who has two coats must share with the one who doesn't have any" (Luke 3:11 ISV). This does not mean we cannot have more than one outfit to wear, but that those who have more than they need should be willing to give of what they have.

Balance Lies Between

Fortunately, the Bible shows us how to achieve balance between these extremes of clothing and appearance. That benchmark of balance is simply modesty. Most people think of modesty as being relative to clothing that is not provocative – and it is that, of course; but clothing does not have to be revealing or suggestive to be immodest. Clothing – or any other aspect of our appearance – that has the primary purpose of drawing attention to oneself is not modest. This can include outlandish clothing or hair styles, ostentatious jewelry, accessories, or other things. The apostle Paul explains this in his letter to Timothy:

I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent and appropriate clothing and not draw attention to themselves by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. (1 Timothy 2:9 NLT)

The immediate context of this verse is one of dressing appropriately for church meetings, but the principle has wider application. And, of course, what Paul says here in relation to women applies just as much, in principle, to men. In the society in which Paul lived this problem was more frequently found among women, though men were certainly not immune to it either. But it is important that we understand what Paul is saying here. Paul exhorts women (we can read "people") of faith to dress and adorn themselves in ways that

are modest rather than in displays of wealth and conspicuous consumption.

Balance is important here – Paul is not speaking about a particular hair style that is somehow immodest, but against a custom of that time of showing off wealth by braiding the hair with gold and silver – just as he goes on to mention gold, pearls, and expensive clothes. The wearing of modest and tasteful jewelry is not what is in mind, but the open display of one's wealth or reliance on such things as our adornment rather than true spiritual qualities that are worth far more. Peter confirmed this when he wrote:

Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. (1 Peter 3:3-4)

The point is that personal beauty should not be based on clothing and outward appearance, but on an inner spiritual attitude that is beautiful to God (1 Samuel 16:7). Whenever we seek to draw attention to ourselves through expensive or socially unusual aspects of our appearance, the emphasis is on self. When we maintain balance through modesty in our appearance, we do so not to elevate ourselves, but to please God.

This basic principle applies in all areas of our appearance and is one of the reasons why tattooing and body-piercing should be limited or avoided by Christians. An Old Testament law forbade tattooing and cutting of the body (Leviticus 19:28), and although this command may not be binding today, we do well to consider if these things really honor God or are purely self-oriented in many cases. As we saw above, Paul tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) and balance in clothing and appearance is one way in which we respect that temple and honor God in our bodies.

A final aspect of balance in this area is that of gender appearances. The overall biblical principle is that we should appear in a manner appropriate for our sex. This does not mean, for example, that women should not wear slacks or pantsuits because these items of clothing are designed to fit women and are socially acceptable forms of women's clothing in most areas of the world. In the same way, Scottish men wear kilts that are perfectly socially acceptable menswear in Scotland. This is very different from the biblical prohibition of a man wearing items of actual women's clothing or vice versa (Deuteronomy 22:5). Paul spoke against long hair on men (1 Corinthians 11:14) for a similar reason – not because long hair is itself a sin, but because a man wishing to glorify God in his appearance should avoid long hair when it is seen as a symbol of womanhood. Balance involves both staying within culturally defined parameters of normal appearance and striving always to honor God.

4. FAITH: WITH OR WITHOUT WORKS?

Some Christians say that we only need faith to be saved, and others say we need works as well. The Catholic Church teaches that both faith and good works are necessary for salvation, while most Protestants believe that salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ alone, and that good works are the result, not a cause, of salvation. How we view this question can affect our Christian lives in major ways, so it is important to clearly understand what the Bible says.

Faith and Salvation

Many verses in the Bible teach that we are saved through faith alone. A clear example is found in Ephesians 2:8–9: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.” Notice Paul tells us we are saved by God’s *grace* (a word meaning “undeserved blessing”) *through* faith in that grace. So if the gift of salvation is undeserved by us, it cannot be based on our good deeds.

Paul explicitly says this in writing to the Christians in Rome: “Since it is through God’s kindness, then it is not by their good works. For in that case, God’s grace would not be what it really is—free and undeserved” (Romans 11:6 NLT). So Paul concluded that “a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law” (Romans 3:28; and see also Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8–9; and Philippians 3:9; etc.).

Paul’s teaching of salvation by faith is firmly based in the teachings of Jesus himself. For example, the account of the repentant woman who washed Jesus’ feet concludes with Jesus’ declaration: “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Luke 7:50). The repentant woman was not saved by washing the Lord’s feet or any other good work – but by her faith in his forgiveness. That is

why what is probably the most well-known verse in the Bible, John 3:16, tells us simply that: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Works and Salvation

On the other hand, Jesus clearly taught that those who refuse to forgive others will not be forgiven by God (Matthew 6:14–15; 18:31–35), that only those who obey God will enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21–23), that only those who bear good fruit are saved (Mark 4:1–20), and that only those who have done good will be resurrected to life (John 5:29). We also find the same truth later in the New Testament, as in Hebrews 5:9 which tells us that Jesus “became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.”

The concept is famously found in the epistle of James who wrote: “You see that a person is considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). This might seem to be a total contradiction of what Paul says, and historically some have gone as far as to reject James’ epistle because his teaching seems to be at variance with that of Paul. Martin Luther, for example, challenged anyone to reconcile the two apostles’ teachings and stated that “[James] contradicts Paul and all Scripture.”

But there is no real contradiction because the scriptures in which Paul talks about salvation by faith are regarding how a person *becomes* a Christian. What James says is regarding how a person *continues* as a Christian. Once this principle is grasped, we can see that Paul stresses the importance of faith for justification – the initial completed aspect of salvation – while James stresses the necessity of good works for sanctification – the ongoing aspect of salvation. To put it in its simplest terms, James argues against a wrong view of faith, Paul rejects a wrong view of works. This different stress is a result of the different audiences James and Paul were addressing. As it is sometimes said: “Paul is attacking self-righteous legalism, and James is attacking self-righteous

indifference.” Paul speaks to those who feel they can be saved by their own works; James speaks to those who feel salvation is by faith that does not need any resultant ongoing good works.

Faith that Works

If we read Paul’s writings carefully, we see that Paul actually incorporates both of these aspects of salvation throughout his letters – a completed aspect based on faith, and a continuing aspect that involves works. Look, for example, at what he says in Romans 6: “You have been set free from sin [completed action] and have become slaves to righteousness [continuing action]” (Romans 6:18). Just as the completed aspect of salvation – based on our faith in Jesus – is clear in Paul’s writings, so is his teaching on the ongoing aspect of salvation that includes works.

For example: “He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (Romans 2:6–7). We can find examples like this throughout Paul’s writings and in each case the connection between works produced by faith and eventual salvation is clear. The expression of this truth is actually found at the end of Paul’s statement that we are saved by grace through faith:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus *to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* (Ephesians 2:8–10)

And, as Paul wrote to Titus:

[God] saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good. (Titus 3:5–8)

What Balancing Faith and Works Means

The Bible is clear that salvation is the gift of God to us – we cannot earn it through good works. We are indeed, saved (past tense) by faith alone. On the other hand, salvation also includes the expression of saving faith (present tense) in good works that are also necessary for the ongoing aspect of salvation (Hebrews 6:12; etc.). Having both faith and works in our lives, rather than just one or the other, is vitally important.

This is because if we trust that salvation only requires faith, we may downplay obedience and fail to produce the kind of good works that God wants to see in our lives – and that he will produce through us if Christ is truly living within us. As Jesus himself said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

On the other hand, if we think that we are justified in God’s sight by good works that we do, we have failed to understand the gospel and the necessary role of our faith in the sacrifice of Christ. As Acts tells us: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Both of these errors – neglecting faith or works – ultimately do not result in salvation. Spiritual balance consists in having both faith and works in our lives because, as is often said, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” This does not mean that we simply add on some good works after we are saved by faith. Rather, once we have been saved through faith in God’s grace, we should continue in the way of salvation with good works that are the product and “fruit” of our new life in Jesus Christ. Paul said exactly this when he wrote: “Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the fruit you reap leads to holiness, and the outcome is eternal life” (Romans 6:22 BSB).

5. GIVING : TOO LITTLE AND TOO MUCH

Giving to those in need is a fundamental aspect of the Christian life (Matthew 6:2-4; Acts 20:35; etc.). But some Christians give very little to help others, while some sincere individuals give everything, or almost everything, they have. What is the right balance in this situation – what does the Bible intend in instructing us to give?

Too Little

Sadly, most people in the world, no matter how much they have, do not give to help others less fortunate than themselves. In the U.S. – one of the most affluent nations in the world – in 2015, for example, only about half of American households donated something to charity. Many centuries ago, the prophet Malachi wrote about a similar situation in his time. The Jews had recently returned from captivity in Babylon and while we might expect that the freedom and new life they had been given would be reason for an outpouring of generosity, such was not the case. God spoke through Malachi regarding this situation:

Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. (Malachi 3:8–10 ESV)

Notice that in this passage of Scripture God’s complaint was not that the people were not giving, but that they were robbing God in not giving as much as they could or should. God says “Bring the *whole* tithe” (vs. 10), showing that people were skimping on their offerings and giving less than what was right. Many other verses in the Old Testament show the principle of not just giving, but giving generously (Psalms 112:5; Proverbs 11:25; etc.).

When we look at the New Testament, we find that Jesus spoke about that kind of generosity when he said: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Matthew 6:19–20). We should, Jesus tells us, be more concerned about saving treasure in heaven than stingily being unwilling to share what we have on earth. That is why Jesus also taught: “Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Luke 6:38).

The apostle Paul reinforced that truth when he wrote: “whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully ... for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:6–7 ESV). While the Old Testament regulated the minimum amount that God’s people were to give to help others (Deuteronomy 14:28), the New Testament gives no percentage rule for this kind of giving, but it makes it clear that we should always be willing to give and even to give to the point of sacrifice when that level of giving is needed (2 Corinthians 8:3).

Many people rationalize that they are too far in debt or that they don’t make enough to give, but if we let ourselves be guided by biblical teaching and the Spirit of God, we will see that we can always give. No matter how little we have, there are those who have less. Certainly, if we are blessed with the means to live a reasonably comfortable way of life (for example, if we are reading this book on a computer, phone or e-book reader), we probably have the ability to give. And if we are able, we are called not just to give, but to give generously.

Too Much

It may seem strange, after talking about not giving generously, to talk about giving too much, but well-intentioned people sometimes feel they should perhaps give most or everything they have if they are to truly follow Christ’s commands. This is usually based on a

mistaken understanding of one or more of a few biblical passages – such as the story of the poor widow who gave all she had (Mark 12:41–44; Luke 21:1–4); that of the rich young ruler Jesus told to sell all he owned and give it to the poor (Matthew 19:16–30); and the accounts in the book of Acts of how the early Christians in Jerusalem sold possessions and “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35).

In reality, these stories all reflect special circumstances. The story of the poor but generous widow simply tells us about the wonderful attitude of giving that the woman had. In her case she appears to have given the last few “pennies” she had at the time, but that does not mean that she had no hope for further income, or that Jesus used the story to show we should give all we have. This is a good example of the theological principle that a biblical story without a command should not be used to decide doctrine or behavior – especially when there are other scriptures that would indicate something different.

This principle applies in exactly the same way to the story of the rich young ruler. The New Testament makes it clear that the young man was being tested but failed the test due to his love of his wealth (Matthew 19:22). And we should notice that in this story Jesus did not command the man to sell everything he had and give to the poor – he simply invited him to do so and to follow him. This was a particular circumstance that applied to a particular individual and should not be seen as some kind of general principle that we should all follow. If we already follow Jesus and if we do not put material things before him – as the young ruler evidently did – the situation does not apply to us.

The final story that is often misunderstood about giving is that of the way in which the early Christians sold and shared their possessions (Acts 4:32, 34–35). Some have used these verses in Acts to try to prove that the early Christians followed a form of communism, but nothing could be further from the truth. We should note that this seems to have been a temporary situation while the fledgling church was becoming established and before any

formal mechanisms for helping the poor within the church were in place. Many of those who had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost and had been converted at that time were now staying in the city and had no means of support. As a result, many local Christians shared what they had to help them. There was no requirement to share (Acts 5:3–4), and once this temporary situation had passed, there is no evidence in Acts or elsewhere in the New Testament that the early church continued the exceptional giving described in Acts 4.

So, it is possible to “give too much” when it comes to generosity. If we give to such a degree that we hurt ourselves and our families, or we prevent ourselves from being able to continue to be a productive part of society, we have missed the balance that God shows us is a part of giving in a way that is pleasing to him.

Balanced Giving

That God does not expect or desire us to give all of what we have under most circumstances is clear in the system of tithes that he instituted for Old Testament Israel. Under this divinely-given system, the Israelites gave a tenth of their increase to God (Leviticus 27:30–33), they saved a tenth to enable them and their families to enjoy the annual religious Holy Day festivals (Deuteronomy 14:22–26), and gave a further tenth every third year to support the poor and needy (Deuteronomy 14:27–29). This meant that not counting the tenth they saved for themselves, the Israelites were instructed to give approximately 13 percent of their income, but this is a long way from giving everything.

We see this kind of balanced giving in the way Jesus himself utilized what funds he and his disciples had – we are told that those funds were used as needed, and some of the funds were given to the poor (John 13:29) rather than anything that was received being automatically given away. Jesus’ attitude toward those in need was always a compassionate one, but it was also realistic. His famous saying that “The poor you will always have with you” (Matthew

26:11; etc.) was not callous but simply honest. These scriptures and others show that Jesus lived the way of giving in a sane and balanced way that strived to help others but not in an unrealistic manner (see Chapter 8, “Helping Others”).

We should also remember the simple fact that God’s balanced way of giving presumes that we will keep what income we need to continue to run our businesses or to work our jobs, as well as to purchase needed items for our families, and to occasionally enjoy good things in proper moderation. In fact, the amount we can give charitably over a lifetime of ongoing business or work far exceeds what we could give if we gave everything we had then had no way to procure further income.

Of course, it is also important that we give for the right reasons – in thankfulness and from a desire to help others. Balanced giving is giving without expecting any return and is the opposite of the kind of giving that is often proclaimed in the so-called “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospel (see Chapter 16, “Prosperity”). We give correctly when we give to help others, not when we give in the hopes of helping ourselves, to be approved, or because we feel compelled. Balanced giving is always giving in love.

6. HEALING: OUR PART AND GOD’S

Our health is, of course, one of the most important aspects of our lives, yet all of us experience illness or injury in the course of our lives, and some have to deal with health problems they were born with. Christians differ in their approach to this truth – at one extreme some downplay what the Bible says about healing and look only to human medical help, while at the other extreme some believe that seeking human medical help is wrong and we should rely on God alone for healing. But the Bible makes it clear that there are human and divine aspects to the matter of healing: we play a part and so does God.

Our Part

The Bible emphasizes that we are to honor God in our bodies (1 Corinthians 6:20) to the extent we can, so Christians have a special responsibility to avoid health problems that are self-caused. This means eating moderately and as well as we can, completely avoiding harmful and wrong substances such as tobacco, drugs, or excessive alcohol, and getting appropriate exercise.

In the same way, when we do get sick, we need to be careful to not make the situation worse by neglecting good methods of care. Hebrews 12:12–13 tells us “strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.” The Greek word translated “disabled” in this verse is a technical medical term meaning “sprained.” In other words, we should take care to not make a health situation worse and to do our part so we may be healed.

Doing our part (see Chapter 18, “Trust”), involves getting medical help in a timely fashion when it is needed. Although some Christians reject human help with health issues, there is not a single

biblical verse that tells us to do this. This is clear if we look at what the verses used to support this approach actually say. For example, 2 Chronicles 16:12 says of King Asa “ Though his disease was severe, even in his illness he did not seek help from the LORD, but only from the physicians” which does not say that he should not have gone to physicians, but that he did not look to God in addition to seeking human help.

Many biblical verses speak of medical treatments, using such things as bandages (Isaiah 1:6), ointment (Jeremiah 8:22), medicinal plants (Ezekiel 47:12), oil (Luke 10:34), and wine (1 Timothy 5:23). Jesus himself said that “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick” (Matthew 9:12), and the apostle Paul refers to Luke, the author of the New Testament books of Luke and Acts, as “the beloved physician” (Colossians 4:14 BSB) – not the beloved ex-physician!

God’s Part

Although physical human medicine can often help us when we are sick or injured, there are times when that help simply is not enough. In times such as those we can turn to God knowing we have done everything possible that we can do. We should not forget that God can work through human medicine if and whenever he chooses to do so, but God may also effect healing more directly.

The Old Testament, and especially the book of Psalms, shows repeatedly that God is a God of healing (Psalm 107:19–20; etc.). In the New Testament we find that a large part of Jesus’ ministry was “healing every disease and sickness among the people” (Matthew 4:23) and that when he sent the twelve disciples out to preach the gospel, he also gave them the power to heal the sick (Luke 9:1-2). Later, after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, the apostles continued this work of healing (Acts 5:12–16; 19:12; 28:8–9), and the New Testament contains specific instruction on how believers could pray for and receive healing (James 5:14–15).

Today, some Christians believe this gift of healing (1 Corinthians 12:9) was a sign, like speaking in tongues, that God only utilized at that particular time for the establishment of the New Testament church – as confirmation of the truth of the gospel the apostles proclaimed. On the other hand, other Christians believe that healings, along with other gifts of the Spirit, are still being granted today if we are willing to claim them.

This divergence of opinion is caused by the fact that both aspects of healing are true. Sometimes people are miraculously healed when they look to God in faith, but this is not always the case. But that does not always mean the individuals who were not healed lacked faith, and we should never judge them by saying or thinking that. We must understand that sometimes it is God's will to heal at this time, but sometimes it simply is not.

Even back in New Testament times, we read that the apostle Paul's assistant Timothy experienced frequent sicknesses (1 Timothy 5:23), and Paul himself suffered from an ongoing problem he called "a thorn in my flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul seems to have asked for healing from this ailment three times (2 Corinthians 12:8–9), but rather than heal him, God gave Paul the strength to bear the problem and to function despite it.

Situations like this are the reason the apostle John wrote that "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us" (1 John 5:14–15). This verse does not mean that God arbitrarily chooses whether to heal us or not, but that how and when God answers our prayers for healing are "according to his will."

In his ultimate wisdom God may choose to heal us now, or he may choose to heal us later – that is always up to him. If our good health were always God's will, then Christians would never die, and that is not God's plan, of course. But the New Testament shows that God will heal all who look to him in faith – if not now, then in his kingdom when "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Balance in the Matter of Healing

So we should not reject appropriate human assistance that is available to us through the dedication and care of the world's doctors, nurses, and other skilled medical workers, but at the same time, we should recognize that human medicine is sometimes limited in what it can accomplish, and always be willing and desirous to turn to God for the additional help that only he can give through divine healing. We can confidently turn to God and ask him for the extra help that only he can give, and we can pray in faith knowing that if we are asking according to God's will, he will heal us in a way and at the time he knows is best.

But this is very different from the unbalanced viewpoint of "health and wealth" teachings (see Chapter 15, "Prosperity") that claim if we do our part, God will grant us perfect health with freedom from sickness and disability. This is contrary to what the Bible teaches and should always be rejected. We are no better than the apostle Paul and other servants of God of the past who suffered ill health and who were sometimes healed and sometimes were not.

We should never feel that it is a lack of faith on our part if we are not healed after sincere prayer. The people of Jesus' day who were not healed by him were individuals who lacked faith and would not accept him (Matthew 13:58). As Christians we have gladly surrendered our wills to his and accept him completely. If we are not healed immediately, it is no different from the situations of Timothy or Paul mentioned above. God may simply desire to teach us lessons that can only be learned through weakness.

But if we are doing our part, healing of our sicknesses and injuries may come at this time through traditional medicine, or it may perhaps come through miraculous intervention by God. Whatever the manner of our healing, if it occurs now we should always express thanks for it (Luke 17:11–19), and if it does not occur now, we should know that according to God's wisdom and perfect timing it will still eventually occur.

7. HEARING GOD: IS HE SPEAKING TO US?

The Bible is a book about God speaking to humanity and the reactions of those who heard him and those who were not receptive to his voice. Today is no different. God still speaks to us, and he does so in a number of ways, but how do we know when this happens and if it is, in fact, God speaking? The answers can affect our lives in many ways.

How God Speaks

When the Bible records instances of God speaking to individuals in the ancient past, we tend to presume that he spoke audibly to them – but the accounts themselves often do not tell us how God communicated with his servants. What we do know is that there are many ways in which God can speak to us.

1. *Nature*: Although the “speaking” may be only in a very general way – communicating God’s wisdom and creative power, for example – we can hear God in the creation, as the Psalms affirm “The heavens declare the glory of God ... They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world” (Psalm 19:1–4; Psalm 29:3; etc.). God may use his creation to stir our hearts and minds and to teach, inspire, or encourage us.

2. *Events*: There is no doubt that God can and does use events in our lives to speak to us. This does not mean that we need look for meaning in every event, but that God may allow or direct events in our lives to guide us, change us, and help us to grow spiritually (James 1:2–5; Hebrews 12:5–11; 1 Peter 1:6–7). We need to be

aware of this to sense course corrections or opportunities God may want us to pursue (Acts 16:6–7; 1 Corinthians 16:9; etc.).

3. *An Audible Voice*: Although the Bible does record God speaking audibly to people on numerous occasions in the past (Exodus 3:14; Joshua 1:1; Judges 6:18; 1 Samuel 3:11; 2 Samuel 2:1; Job 40:1; Isaiah 7:3; Jeremiah 1:7; Acts 8:26; 9:15; etc.), today this would be an exceptional occurrence, as we will see.

4. *Dreams*: The Bible shows that God often used dreams to convey messages to people in the past (Numbers 12:6; etc.), and while this is still possible today (Acts 2:17) we must be careful – the Bible shows dreams can come as a result of many reasons and may often be meaningless (Ecclesiastes 5:3, 7).

5. *Our Thoughts and Consciences*: God can certainly speak to us by placing thoughts in our minds – that is part of what 1 Corinthians 2:16 means – but such thoughts should be confirmed as being of God in other ways before we make significant decisions or actions based on them (2 Corinthians 13:1). To a degree, God also helps us to discern right from wrong through our consciences (1 Timothy 1:5; 1 Peter 3:16; etc.) and this is a particularly important way in which he can speak to us. Our consciences are only general guides, however, and may need to be educated in many areas.

6. *Other People*: God may speak to us through other people – perhaps more than we realize. This was, of course, the situation with the biblical prophets and other people of God who spoke on God's behalf (Jeremiah 1:2; Acts 21:3–4; etc.). Today God can speak to us through the spoken or written exhortations of pastors, teachers, and other believers, but we must be careful to ascertain that what others tell us is biblical. Even the biblical writers themselves were careful to note when they were speaking from their own perspective rather than speaking what God clearly states (1 Corinthians 7:12).

7. *The Bible*: The Scriptures are, of course, the clearest vehicle of the word of God and it is through them that God primarily speaks to us today (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Certainly, the Holy Spirit may lead us through any of the ways in which God speaks (John 16:13), but it is through the Scriptures that God's communication most clearly enters our hearts and minds (Hebrews 4:12).

Balance in Hearing God

There are a number of principles that we must keep in mind if we are to hear God correctly in our lives.

First, we must be receptive to the word of God. Jeremiah complained "To whom can I speak and give warning? Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed so they cannot hear"(Jeremiah 6:10). We must want to hear God. But if we do, and if we strive to draw close to him, he promises to speak to us, as Jeremiah also affirmed: "This is what the LORD says ... 'Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know'" (Jeremiah 33:2-3).

Second, although we must be open to God's communication however it may come to us (Job 33:14), we must realize that ultimately *none* of the first six ways listed above in which God could possibly speak to us can be trusted by and of themselves without testing the message that comes through them (1 John 4:1; etc.). It is all too easy to think we are hearing God when we are in fact hearing what we want to hear.

Third, it is imperative that we understand and accept that it is by the Bible that all the other methods through which God may possibly be speaking to us must be judged. The Scriptures are the surest word of God that we have – as Peter tells us: "We also have the word of the prophets as confirmed beyond doubt. And you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a lamp shining in a dark place" (2 Peter 1:19 BSB). Here, by "the prophets" Peter means all the writers of the Scriptures – and it is only those words that we can trust

beyond doubt. Today, the written word of God supersedes all the other ways in which God has spoken to people in the past.

Beyond these basic principles, in whatever way we feel we have heard a word from God that could affect us or others in important ways, it is always wise to share the message with a mature Christian leader to gain their counsel on it to make sure that we do not misunderstand or misapply what we are hearing. Paul tells us “Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ... and become mature” (Ephesians 4:11–13). This seeking confirmation of what we are hearing requires humility, but we should always be wary of believing that God is speaking important things to us alone.

The Bible gives us a wonderful example of how to react to situations in which we think we are being spoken to in a manner other than through the written word of God. The first book of Samuel tells us the story of how the Lord called the prophet Samuel. The account tells us that when he heard a voice calling him, Samuel presumed it was a natural circumstance (rather than immediately presuming it was God calling). When he told his mentor, the high priest Eli, about what he had heard, Eli suggested that Samuel let it go (rather than immediately presuming it was God calling). Only when Samuel distinctly heard the call three times did Eli accept that this was God’s doing and instructed Samuel how to respond (1 Samuel 3:1–10).

The lesson for us in this story is clear. We should always be open to hearing God’s voice in any way he might choose to speak to us (John 8:47), but we should never presume it is God’s voice on the basis of a single dream, a sudden thought, an unusual event in our lives, or even a feeling that we heard an audible voice. Humility should make us receptive to God’s voice, but it should also make us realize we should not presume that God will speak to us other than through his word.

There may well be times when God speaks to us in other ways, but we should always be careful in this, pray that God will make it

clear if he is in fact speaking, and, if it is an important issue, seek confirmation through those God has ordained to help his people. There is a trend today in which some Christians seek to hear a message from God that is beyond what we have been given in the Bible. God does not encourage this in his word.

Finally, we should realize that every year many Christians unintentionally hurt themselves and others by presuming God is giving a special message to them alone. God does guide his work today, of course, but he more usually speaks to us regarding how we personally lead our lives and interact with him.

Hearing God is primarily about being receptive to and following him – as he said through the prophet Isaiah: “Pay attention and come to me; listen, so that you will live” (Isaiah 55:3 CSB). Likewise, the book of Hebrews tells us multiple times “Today if you hear his voice ... do not harden your hearts” (Hebrews 3:7–8, 15; 4:7) – we must apply what we hear (Psalm 85:8; Hebrews 2:1; etc.).

And we should be continually seeking to hear God *in his written word*. The more we study the Scriptures, the more we come to know God. The more we know God, the more we hear what God is saying to us – however he speaks.

8. HELPING OTHERS: BALANCING CARING WITH CAUTION

Most people have experienced being asked: “Could you spare some change? – I need help” or have seen individuals carrying signs pulling at heart strings from every possible direction: “Homeless” “Veteran” “Injured” “Hungry” “Please help – God bless.” Some of these requests may reflect genuine need, but police officers and social welfare agents know that this is just a business for a good number of people, and that they are not truly destitute. We may know this too, but how are we to judge a given case? What is the Christian’s right response when asked for help in such circumstances?

Caring

Dozens of scriptures throughout the Bible show our responsibility to those in need. In the Old Testament there are many specific commands urging us to help the poor and needy. Deuteronomy tells us, for example: “If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them” (Deuteronomy 15:7). Other verses show the blessings that come to us from helping others in this way – as we see in the book of Proverbs: “Whoever is generous to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will repay him for his deed” (Proverbs 19:17 ESV).

In the New Testament we find that Jesus cared for those in need (John 13:29) and commanded that we care for them also (Luke 11:41). His parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is one of the greatest expositions of the principle of helping others found in the Bible and in all of world literature. The apostle Paul also stressed helping others, telling us, for example, “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share

with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). Likewise, the apostle James wrote that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27) – showing that helping those in true need is just as important as moral concerns. But no scripture is perhaps clearer on this aspect of love than 1 John 3:17: “If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?”

Caution

But God’s word is not divorced from reality. The Bible shows that people sometimes feign appearances for their own purposes, putting on an act to get what they want (Joshua 9). It confirms the possibility that some who ask for help may be doing so not because they are in true need, but because they do not want to work. The apostle Paul stresses the unworthiness of such behavior and that “one who is unwilling to work shall not eat” (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Caution in helping others is actually implicit in 1 John 3:17 – the verse we considered above – if we look closely. Notice first that John’s reference to “a brother or sister in need” puts his statement in the context of helping fellow believers (see also Romans 15:26 and elsewhere), though the principle can, of course, be extended to any human brother or sister needing help. But the two key words in this verse are “sees” and “needs.” The word “sees” clearly indicates that we have evidence of the need – we are not somehow bound to accept someone’s statement of need without “seeing” its reality.

Even more importantly, the word “need” which John uses (*chreian*) means real needs (such as food and clothing) of a serious and not a frivolous or contrived nature. The two concepts actually go hand in hand as real need is usually clearly visible – just as the need of the injured ancient traveler was clear to the Good Samaritan.

Balancing Caring and Caution

Today, the wise Samaritan acknowledges the perspectives of both willingness to help and caution – being caring yet careful. When we are asked for help and the situation seems genuine, a primary response might be to call appropriate assistance. Police and other services are trained and prepared to help individuals in immediately difficult circumstances.

But if the situation does not appear to warrant professional help, we might ask ourselves – Is this person really in need? Will any help we give be put to real need? Sadly, when offered food or items of clothing, many asking for help will decline the offer as the cash is really wanted for other things such as alcohol or drugs. We should certainly consider the moral responsibility of not enabling an addiction whenever cash is requested. We also owe it to those in need to be good stewards of the resources that are available to us – employing them wisely where real need is found.

There is much that we can do to help those in genuine need, but we need to be wise Samaritans and careful stewards of our available resources if we are to help them to the fullest extent of our ability. The savvy Samaritan can often do more good by contributing even small amounts to worthwhile charities that carefully administer their help (see Chapter 5, “Giving”). The most desperate needs are often far from where we may be. But even then we can apply wisdom by choosing charities that we know have been carefully screened or developed by groups we trust such as our churches.

Before donating to other charities, the internet-savvy Samaritan may want to look at their ratings and use of funds by checking some of the online sites run by monitoring organizations (for example, <http://www.charitynavigator.org>). It is clear that many “good causes” spend a great deal of their donations on overheads, and some may use funds for purposes that address no urgent need. We can magnify the good we can do by choosing charities wisely, perhaps volunteering time with good ones, and by praying for the success of those that do serve and help those in genuine need. We

should also realize that sometimes the best help we can give those in need is not physical (Matthew 11:5; Acts 3:1–6).

None of this is to say that we should pull back from physically helping others when genuine need is present before us. Belief devoid of willingness to help those in real need is a poor excuse for true religion, as the apostle James so clearly shows: “If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it?” (James 2:16 and see Isaiah 58:7). Some people choose to err on the side of kindness when asked for help - even if they feel they are perhaps being taken advantage of. Some carry a little easily accessed cash separate from billfold or purse for cases which might be genuine.

But we need not feel swayed by words of “need” written on cardboard signs or by unsubstantiated requests for money. Nothing in God's word urges us to give to those who are making a living simply by saying they are in need. Everything in God's word shows that we should not hesitate to help where help is truly needed.

9. HUMILITY: IT'S MORE THAN YOU THINK

Humility is one of the central tenets of the Christian faith, but it is a concept people often do not fully understand. Many people who may appear humble do not have true biblical humility, and sometimes the opposite is true! Where does the balance lie in this important area?

Too Much Humility?

Although it is often said that we “cannot get too much of a good thing,” humility as it is commonly understood may be an exception. The dictionary defines humility as “a modest or low view of one's own importance” – which is accurate regarding the actual meaning of the word. But in everyday life humility tends to get confused with its evil twin – lack of confidence. Many people in this world view humility as being weak or almost excessively mild, and it is not often seen as a trait we really want ourselves. It is Superman who is the hero, not his mild-mannered alter-ego Clark Kent. We are constantly told today that we should “assert ourselves.”

But true humility is certainly not a lack of confidence, even though it may not usually choose to be assertive in the sense of pushing itself forward. True humility is not so much a lack of confidence as it is a lack of ego. True humility includes strength as well as mildness. God himself is all-powerful yet humble (Isaiah 57:15), and we have only to look at the life of Jesus to see this balance in action. Jesus personified true humility (Matthew 11:29) but he regularly exhibited strength in dealing with his opponents and those who mistaught God's truth.

True humility is also not being naïve or unsophisticated, as some think. It is having the heart of a child (Matthew 18:3) but not the mind of a child. And true humility is certainly not the kind of low opinion of oneself that, if it is taken to extremes, is self-hate. Paul

wrote “What a wretched man I am!” (Romans 7:24), and that he was the worst of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15). But he also wrote that he had worked harder than all the other apostles (1 Corinthians 15:10), and that “there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me” (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul was humble (2 Corinthians 10:1; Ephesians 3:7–8) and saw himself in true perspective. But, like Jesus, Paul did not lack confidence or a right self-image. Lack of these things is often the result of too much humility of the wrong kind.

Not Enough Humility

At the other extreme, and perhaps far more common, is the problem of lack of humility. We do not have to look far in the world around us to find the kind of self-exalting arrogance that is the very antithesis of right humility. We also find this attitude in many of the unrighteous characters described in the Bible. We can see it, for example, in the stories of Korah (Numbers 16:1–35), Goliath (1 Samuel 17:41–47), Saul (1 Samuel 15:17–23), Uzziah (2 Chronicles 26:16–21), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:1–37), Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:21–23), and Diotrefes (3 John 1:9–10), to name only a few.

But lack of humility can also be found in those who might appear, on the surface, to be religious and even humble. As is often said, humble deeds do not always flow from humble hearts – we can display humble actions even when we are not humble in our attitudes. The Pharisee in Jesus’ parable who prayed regularly in the temple, but who had no real humility (Luke 18:9–14) is a clear example of this.

If we are honest, we can also find many examples of the lack of humility in our own lives. Many times, when we get into arguments or disagreements with others, an absence of real humility is to blame; and ultimately, even our impatience with others in store checkout lines, driving on the highway, and in many other circumstances of everyday life, is the result of a lack of humility as much as anything else. If we see others as just as important as

ourselves, our need to never be delayed by them is greatly diminished.

Finding True Humility

Clearly, real humility is balanced between an overly negative or overly positive view of oneself. True humility accepts both the Bible's assessment of the flawed human condition and humanity's wonderful potential. But there is another aspect of balance in this area that is very important, yet is often overlooked.

We have all heard the wonderful quotation, often attributed to C.S. Lewis, that "true humility is not thinking less of oneself, but thinking of oneself less." This pithy saying perfectly sums up what we might call the first half of humility – the attitude that underlies truly humble behavior. When the focus of our minds is on ourselves, we will never be truly humble. It is only as we refocus our minds onto God and others that we see ourselves in better perspective and can begin to find what real humility is.

But, important as this truth may be, it is only half of the totality of true humility. While we do need a humble attitude, we also need humble behavior. Although, as we said above, actions alone do not make humility, attitude alone does not either. The proof of this is seen in the life and ministry of Jesus himself:

Who, being in very nature God, did not *consider* equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a *servant*, being made in human likeness he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!
(Philippians 2:6–8)

Notice how Paul stresses both the attitude of Jesus – how he considered himself – and the actions of Jesus – how he acted as an obedient servant. This truth is echoed in the words of Jesus himself when he said "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28) – once again stressing the attitude and the action of humility.

We should not only have the same attitude, or mindset as Christ (Philippians 2:5), but also his same commitment to service (Luke 22:27), because it is to the degree we serve that we express and live out humility. Ultimately, there can be no real humility without service. Just as we can act humbly without having a truly humble attitude, we can also have a humble attitude without truly living humility. Balanced humility is both thinking of ourselves as we should, and then living accordingly.

10. JUDGING OTHERS: RIGHTLY AND WRONGLY

Seen out of context, some passages in the New Testament seem to give opposite commands in the matter of whether we should judge others or not. For example, Jesus said “judge with right judgment ” (John 7:24 ESV), but also said “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matthew 7:1 ESV). As a result, some Christians feel that judging other people’s words, actions, or intent is always wrong, while others think we should judge others with right judgment. It is important that we understand what the Bible really says in this area.

When Judging Is Right

When Jesus told the people of Jerusalem “judge with right judgment” (John 7:24 ESV), he obviously was stating that judging – done correctly – is not wrong. On another occasion, Jesus said:

Beware of false prophets who come disguised as harmless sheep but are really vicious wolves. You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit ... Yes, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit, so you can identify people by their actions. (Matthew 7:15–20 NLT)

Clearly, these instructions from Jesus tell us how to judge others with right judgment – by looking at and assessing the fruits of their lives and behavior. We do this not by setting ourselves up as judges who decide what is right and wrong, but by comparing the fruits of others to the fruits of righteousness that are described in the Bible. Just as we can judge who are false prophets or teachers by comparing what they say with the word of God, so we can assess the

fruits of people's lives in other areas. Judgment based on what God reveals is neither arbitrary nor wrong.

In his letter to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul tells us that believers will not only judge the world in God's kingdom, but should also be able to judge correctly now: "do you not know that the saints will judge the world ... How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life" (1 Corinthians 6:2–3 ESV).

In fact, the Bible gives a number of areas of life in which we must judge others if we are to live as Christians. We are specifically told to judge the influence others have on us (Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 15:33; etc.). We are told to gently but firmly confront brothers or sisters in Christ who are in error (Galatians 6:1). And we are told to apply discipline to those in the church who are guilty of sinful behavior (Matthew 18:15–17). We cannot do these things without judging, but when they are done in love the judging is right and proper and established by God's word.

When Judging Is Wrong

If it is not done carefully, judging others can certainly be wrong. The Bible specifically highlights the following seven wrongful forms of judging:

1. *Judging by appearances*: Judgment based on outward appearances is often mistaken and wrong. Jesus said "Stop judging by mere appearances" (John 7:24). In fact, Proverbs 18:13 tells us it is shameful to jump to conclusions regarding the behavior of others before confirming the facts. The book of Joshua gives us a clear example of this problem (Joshua 22:9–24), and the New Testament gives another in telling how Simon the Pharisee wrongfully judged the woman who washed Jesus' feet based on her appearance and reputation – and was rebuked by Jesus as a result (Luke 7:36–50).

2. *Judging the motive rather than the situation*: If we judge someone based on what we presume is their motivation for what

seems to be wrong speech or actions, we run the risk of judging wrongfully. Only God knows the hearts and minds (Jeremiah 11:20) and we should not try to emulate him. Looking down on those who are poor or sick by presuming they have brought their troubles on themselves in some way is another form of this same sin.

3. *Judging in pride*: Self-righteous judgment is always wrong. In the parable Jesus gave of the Pharisee and the repentant tax collector (Luke 18:9–14), the Pharisee was proud of his own perfection and judged the tax collector as being far less righteous than himself. Jesus showed that this pride and judgmental nature discounted any righteousness the Pharisee may have had, and that the tax-collector was more justified before God than he was.

4. *Judging by human standards*: When it is separated from the foundation of God's word, judgment is often wrong because it is based on relative morality, personal opinion, or human dogma. The New Testament shows the Pharisees greatly expanded God's laws in an attempt to stop people from getting near to breaking them, but this misguided approach led them to often wrongfully judge those who broke not God's commandments but humanly contrived ones (Matthew 15:9). We can do this today by judging people who do not seem to be following minor human rules (or our own personal standards) as closely as we do.

5. *Judging hypocritically*: Judging others for sins that we ourselves are guilty of is clearly a sin. The command Jesus gave in Matthew 7:1–2 "Do not judge, or you too will be judged" was given directly after mentioning hypocrites (Matthew 6:2, 5, 16) and before warning against hypocrisy (Matthew 7:3–5). Paul also stresses that if we judge others in this way, we condemn ourselves (Romans 2:1).

6. *Judging condolingly*: If we accept sinful behavior in ourselves or others as acceptable because of weakness or favoritism, we condone sin by not judging it severely enough. Downplaying wrongs such as

smoking, or pornography use, as that which “doesn’t hurt anyone else” is mistaken and not judging with right judgment (Romans 1:32).

7. *Judging without mercy*: Harsh, unforgiving judgment that is not interested in helping others is wrong and will ultimately hurt us. We are told the merciful will be shown mercy (Matthew 5:7), and, as Jesus warned, “in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2). Judgment without mercy is judgment without love – but, James 2:13 says, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

Balance in Judging Others

As Christians we know we are not sinless (1 John 1:8) and must work, with God’s help, to root out sin in our lives as much as possible (Colossians 3:5–10; etc.). And yet, despite the knowledge of our own sins, we all fall down and are occasionally guilty of wrongful judgmental thoughts or words – and that is one of the areas of Christian life in which we must all grow. Avoiding the different kinds of wrongful judgment discussed in this chapter is fundamental to that growth.

But we must also exercise balance when we apply right judgment. This is especially important today because Christians are so often accused of intolerance when they speak out against sin. Opposing sin is not wrong – as the Bible clearly shows (Acts 20:27–28; 2 Timothy 4:2; etc.), and simply stating the biblical standard is not judging, so we need not be afraid of doing that. But even opposing clear sin should be done with respect (Jude 1:9) and with the person’s interest in mind rather than self-righteously or critically declaring other people to be sinful. This is where “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) comes into play. Judging can be accurate but still not right. Judging rightly is always a combination of judging according to truth and love.

11. LAW: WHICH LAWS SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP TODAY?

The Bible contains hundreds of laws – how are we to know which ones apply to us today? Some Christians teach that all the laws found in the Old Testament were part of the Old Covenant – that those laws are done away, and we now just keep Jesus’ commandments to love God and one another. But when Jesus said “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37), he was quoting the law stated in Deuteronomy 6:5. And when he said “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:39), he was quoting a law given in Leviticus 19:18. So, those laws obviously still apply. And there are many other Old Testament laws that we should still obey today – such as the laws telling us not to lie, steal, or commit adultery – which first appear in the Old Testament but are also clearly acknowledged in the New Testament.

On the other hand, there are numerous New Testament scriptures which do say that “the law” was done away by Christ’s sacrifice. For example, Paul tells us that Christ “made of no effect the law consisting of commands and expressed in regulations” (Ephesians 2:15 CSB), and that “now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian [the law]” (Galatians 3:25 ESV).

Types of Law

The answer to the seeming contradiction of saying there are laws we should keep and that the laws are done away with lies in the *different types* of law found in the Old Testament (Jeremiah 7:22-23).

1. *The ritual or ceremonial laws.* Of the more than 600 laws found in the Old Testament, the great majority are the ritual laws pertaining to the temple, its priesthood, and sacrifices (for example, the laws regarding killing and offering sacrifices). This is the easiest category to deal with as the New Testament unequivocally shows that these laws foreshadowed the work and death of Jesus Christ and were fulfilled by him as the ultimate sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11–14). That is why the apostle Paul draws a clear distinction between the ritual laws of the Old Testament and the spiritual or moral laws (see below) in verses such as this: “Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God’s commands is what counts (1 Corinthians 7:19).

2. *The civil or national laws.* These laws were given for the civil administration of the physical nation of ancient Israel (for example, the laws regarding penalties for accidental manslaughter). The purpose of many of these laws was to provide an identity for Israel as the people of God and to guide them in the daily life of the nation. Because we do not live under the government of ancient Israel, most of these laws do not directly apply to us today. Yet the principles behind many of these laws can still be applied today. For example, the Old Testament civil law states that the people of God were not to muzzle an ox, but must allow it to eat as it was used to thresh the grain (Deuteronomy 25:4). In the New Testament, Paul uses the principle behind this law to show that it is not wrong for a minister of the gospel to be supported by the work he does. Here, and in other cases, Paul argues from an old civil law to a modern application of its principle.

3. *The spiritual or moral laws.* These are actually a minority of the laws of the Old Testament, yet they are the most important (for example, the laws against murder). The Ten Commandments are particularly vital because they summarize the moral or spiritual laws given to Israel, and even though the moral laws are found in the Mosaic law, they did not originate with Moses. Many scholars

feel that there is clear biblical evidence of all Ten Commandments being understood before the nation of Israel came into existence. We certainly find these laws being followed in the later writings of the New Testament, which shows that they were not like the sacrificial or civil laws pertaining to Israel alone, and that they continued beyond the death of Christ (see Ephesians 6:1–2, for example). As a result, we can say that the spiritual or moral laws found in the Old Testament transcend time and space and are perfectly applicable today.

Although the ritual laws of the Old Testament were fulfilled by Christ's sacrifice, and the civil laws of Israel are no longer applicable because the church is not a separate physical nation, the basic moral laws of the Old Testament are clearly reflected in the New Testament (Romans 13:8–10; Colossians 3:5–10; etc.). The noted theologian and pastor Tim Keller wrote:

Paul makes clear that the apostles understood the Old Testament moral law to still be binding on us ...The moral law outlines God's own character — his integrity, love and faithfulness. Old Testament commandments about loving our neighbor, caring for the poor, being generous with our possessions and being committed to family still apply. The New Testament continues to forbid killing and adultery, and the sexual ethic of the Old Testament is restated throughout the New Testament. If the New Testament reaffirms an Old Testament commandment, then it continues to have force for us today. (From "Old Testament Law and the Charge of Inconsistency" by Timothy Keller)

Although we may have heard that all we have to do as Christians is to love God and our fellow humans, the spiritual or moral laws were given to show us *how* to do that. That is why the apostle John (the "apostle of love" himself) tells us "this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome," (1 John 5:3;

and see Revelation 12:17; 14:12). In the same way, Paul – who is most frequently cited by some to show all laws were done away – wrote “We know that the law is good if one uses it properly” (1 Timothy 1:8), and “Do we, then, nullify the law by ... faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law” (Romans 3:31), and “So then the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). Paul even wrote that:

Even Gentiles, who do not have God’s written law, show that they know his law when they instinctively obey it, even without having heard it. They demonstrate that God’s law is written in their hearts, for their own conscience and thoughts either accuse them or tell them they are doing right. (Romans 2:14–15 NLT)

These biblical verses all show that while the sacrificial and national laws did pass away, the more basic and universal moral laws are fundamental and remain to guide us today.

Balance in Keeping the Law

So the law keeping that God intends for us today consists of obeying the timeless moral or spiritual laws that can be seen from the beginning of the Bible to its end. Although other types of biblical law are no longer binding, the purpose of all the laws given by God is to act as guides and signposts in life. In many cases we can also learn valuable principles from the other types of laws found in the Old Testament – which is why Paul tells us that “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16 NKJV).

But Paul is equally clear in showing that the Christian should not become enslaved to laws that were fulfilled or no longer apply (Galatians 5:1–3), and that we should never view the keeping of laws as a means to salvation (See Chapter 4, “Faith”).

Finally, we should remember that there are ditches on both sides of the path of law keeping. On the one side is the ditch of legalism and keeping the letter of the law but not its spiritual intent – which Jesus showed is wrong (Luke 11:39–42). On the other side is lawlessness and the rejecting of God’s wisdom and right to tell his created beings how to live – which the whole Bible condemns as sin (1 John 3:4). But between these wrongful extremes is the balanced path of law-keeping which is summarized by the commands to love God and to love our fellow beings. Jesus himself said “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15 ESV), and it is by keeping those commandments that we love God and our neighbor as well.

12. PERFECTION: IS IT IMPOSSIBLE, OR COMMANDED?

Many Bible readers are confused when they find verses appearing to say that we must be perfect in this life, and others that appear to say spiritual perfection is not possible for physical human beings. Some become concerned that they may not be perfect enough and fear that God is always displeased with them. This can lead to much unhappiness, and it is important that we understand the situation properly in order to live the kind of joyful lives God desires for us. So, what is the Christian's responsibility – is perfection something we must aim for now, or is it simply not possible in this life?

Be Perfect?

The Bible clearly shows that we are called to a life of overcoming (Revelation 2:7; etc.), and some scriptures seem to indicate we must overcome and become perfect now. Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount are often quoted as an example of this: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But to understand Jesus' words properly, we must look at them in context. In Matthew, Jesus tells us to be perfect as God is perfect, but if we read the same account in the Gospel of Luke his words are recorded as "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). Both Gospels show in context that Jesus was talking about *love* (see Matthew 5:43–47 and Luke 6:27–35). Matthew's Gospel stresses that our love should be perfect, and Luke's Gospel stresses that our love should be merciful – doubtless Jesus talked about both aspects of love and each writer recorded a different aspect of what was said.

When we look closely at the expression “Be perfect,” we see the situation even more clearly. The Greek word translated “perfect” in Matthew is a form of *teleios* which does mean “perfect,” but in the sense of being mature or complete. Notice 1 Corinthians 14:20, for example, where we find: “Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults” – and the word “adults” is the word *teleios*. In Hebrews 5:14 we find the same word translated mature: “solid food is for the mature.”

In the context of love that we find in Matthew 5:48, Christ urged his followers to be mature and complete in their love – like God who is himself Love. Only a few verses before saying “be perfect” Jesus had said: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44–45), once again showing we should be mature in our love. The same is true in other New Testament verses where the word “perfect” found in some translations should be “mature” (Ephesians 4:13; Colossians 1:28; etc.).

Mission Impossible?

So, Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount and similar verses do not mean that God expects us to always be perfect. In the same way, New Testament verses that say we must be “pure,” “innocent,” “spotless,” “blameless,” or the like (2 Peter 3:14; etc.) are based on Greek words such as *akeraioi* meaning “pure” in the sense of not being a mixture of good and evil. In the same way, when John writes: “Everyone who has been born of God does not sin ... he is not able to sin, because he has been born of God” (1 John 3:9 CSB) he is talking about ongoing, continual sinning (see ASV, BSB, ESV, NIV, and most other modern translations). These and similar expressions do not imply that we never fall down or make mistakes, but that we are not consciously accepting ongoing sins in our lives.

The same is true in the Old Testament. Although Job 1:1 tells us that Job was blameless, and God himself said he was (Job 1:1, 1:8;

2:3), the Hebrew word translated “blameless” does not necessarily mean spiritually perfect and completely sinless. This can be seen in that the book itself shows Job’s failings. In 7:21 Job states “Why do you not pardon my offenses and forgive my sins?” and in 42:6 Job confirms his own sinfulness when he says: “Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.” So it is clear that being “blameless” or “perfect” before God in Job – and elsewhere in the Old Testament – means being morally upright, but it does not refer to some kind of sinless perfection.

In fact, the Bible shows repeatedly that God knows we cannot be perfect in every way. Notice, for example, in the Old Testament: “There is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20), and what the apostle John tells us in the New Testament: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

It does not make sense that God would command us to be perfect when he knows we cannot be. The truth is, we are always going to be subject to human nature in this life and no matter how hard we try not to sin, we will still occasionally do so (Romans 7:14–15). The New Testament shows that the apostles themselves made mistakes and sinned – even after they received God’s Spirit (Galatians 2:11–13); etc.), and we can hardly claim to be different. Full spiritual perfection will not come until the next life, which is why God accepts Christ’s perfect life in place of ours, just as he accepts Christ’s death on our behalf (Romans 5:10). Perfection is clearly beyond us at this time, but does that mean we should not strive for it?

Finding Balance

The fact that we cannot be perfect yet does not mean that we need not strive in our own lives toward the goal of perfection. Jesus himself said “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching... Anyone who does not love me will not obey my teaching” (John 14:23–24). Of course, we must always remember that our own efforts to obey

God will never gain our salvation (Ephesians 2:8–9; Galatians 2:16; etc.). Rather, our motivation for trying to be as perfect as possible must be our love of God (John 14:15) – and if we do truly love God, we will be making every effort to obey and please him.

Fortunately, God has made a way for us to be perfect in his sight through Christ living within us (2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20). But God still expects us to turn from a lifestyle of continuous sinning. That is what the apostle John meant when he wrote: “No one who lives in him keeps on sinning” (1 John 3:6). This is what theologians call the process of “sanctification” in which our lives are made progressively more holy.

God does not expect never-failing perfection in our daily lives – but he does expect and help us to make continued progress in growing up in him and becoming more like Christ as we live each day. As Paul affirmed, we must all grow and overcome “until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

So, it is a misconception that God expects us to be as perfect now as he is – and that he is continually unhappy with us when we are not. As we saw, God looks on the perfection of Christ dwelling within us through his Spirit, and through his word he urges us to do our best with his help. In that way, if we are growing spiritually, we do move toward perfection in this life, but only toward it. Eventually, we will live forever with God in full sinless perfection (Revelation 22:1–5). Until that time, we will all fall down occasionally, but we must joyfully strive to do as well as we can, with God’s help, to fulfill his law of love as well as possible (John 15:10).

13. PERSECUTION: TO FLEE OR NOT TO FLEE?

Jesus repeatedly warned his followers that they would suffer persecution (Matthew 5:10–12; 10:16–42; etc.), and the apostle Paul wrote that “everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”(2 Timothy 3:12). If we are truly living as Christ did, we will invariably experience resistance and persecution to some degree or another. But what is the Christian’s responsibility in these situations? Should we flee persecution as some say, or is this a lack of faith as others believe, and should we remain in the situation as a witness to our persecutors?

A Time Not to Flee

The simple answer to the dilemma posed above is that the Christian should use wisdom in assessing the situations they find themselves in. Not all persecution is of a severe nature, and we should not be in too great a hurry to avoid minor expressions of hatred. As long as the persecution is nowhere near any kind of endangerment or physical abuse, we can often turn instances of relatively mild persecution into opportunities to let those antagonizing us see Christ through us (1 Peter 2:12).

In this kind of situation, we must remember that when Jesus was persecuted, he “did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered” (1 Peter 2:23 NLT). This is why Peter wrote “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing” (1 Peter 3:9) – just as Jesus had taught “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:27–28).

If persecution is ongoing but not severe, we may well have opportunity to help our persecutors, and we can certainly pray for them and treat them with love despite their hatred. Paul, in writing

to the Christians at Rome, quoted the book of Proverbs on this subject: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” and continued “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20–21).

We never know what effect it might have on our persecutors to see the way of Christ, and to what degree it might help them turn from their negative assessment of his followers. Certainly, many persecutors have been influenced for good by the Christian responses of those they harassed; but the greater the level of persecution, the less likely this becomes. Paul, we should remember, was not converted when he saw the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7:54–60), but only when Christ himself intervened directly in Paul’s life (Acts 9:1–19).

A Time to Flee

On the other hand, staying and enduring severe persecution is often neither wise nor necessary when we have opportunity to avoid it. A recent article in a Christian publication stated that those undergoing persecution in areas where they and their families were no longer safe should not attempt to flee, but that they should have faith and should stay where they are to be a light to those around them, including their persecutors. Although the writer was doubtless well meaning, it is important that persecuted Christians understand there is nothing biblically wrong with fleeing to protect oneself and one’s family rather than staying in the proverbial “frying pan.” In fact, Christ specifically commanded his disciples to do exactly that when he said: “When you are persecuted in one place, *flee* to another” (Matthew 10:23, emphasis added).

Whenever it has been possible, fleeing persecution has characterized Christianity throughout its history. We have only to look at the biblical record to see many examples of men and women of God who fled when their lives were threatened. Moses fled Egypt before later returning (Exodus 2:15). Elijah fled from the murderous Jezebel (1 Kings 19:3), Jeremiah urged the people of

Jerusalem to flee before the city was attacked by enemies (Jeremiah 6:1), The family of Christ was commanded to flee with the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:13), and Jesus, of course, told his followers not that they should not flee, but that they should pray that their flight would not be at a dangerous and difficult time (Matthew 24:20). It is historically clear that when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70, with a great loss of Jewish life, few if any Christians died in the siege of the city, as they had followed the teaching of their master – and fled.

We see this pattern of fleeing persecution repeatedly in the New Testament. The book of Acts shows that when Stephen was martyred: “On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria” (Acts 8:1). The result of this fleeing was not some kind of spiritual decline of the church, rather: “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (vs. 4), and Christianity both spread and increased as a result.

Even the leaders of the early church who stayed in Jerusalem thought it wise to flee when circumstances indicated they should. We see that the apostle Peter fled when his life was threatened (Acts 12:17), and the apostle Paul fled on numerous occasions to avoid persecution and threats to his life (Acts 14:6; etc.).

To Flee or Not to Flee?

So the Bible does not teach that it is a lack of faith to flee when every indication is that it would be wise to do so. Certainly, there are cases where God has called individuals to stay and face persecution, but without a clear call to do so, God expects us to use wisdom in all things (Ecclesiastes 7:12) and to avoid threats that are avoidable. As Proverbs tells us twice: “The prudent see danger and take refuge, but the simple keep going and pay the penalty” (Proverbs 22:3; 27:12).

The answer to most life-threatening persecution is not to stay, but to have the kind of faith that trusts God enough to flee and receive his guidance and help to reach a place of safety. The church has always fled when appropriate and always will (Revelation 12:6). If we find ourselves in a situation where persecution is severe or life threatening and we cannot flee for some reason, we can only commit ourselves into God's hands – remembering that “even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed” (1 Peter 3:14). But under most normal circumstances we will be given an opportunity to flee when persecution occurs – and if we are wise, we will do so.

A final but important aspect of handling persecution correctly in our Christian lives, for those of us who enjoy peace and safety, is that we should strive to frequently remember in prayer our brothers and sisters who are unable to escape persecution. Hebrews 13:3 tells us specifically: “remember ... those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Discrimination in education and employment, verbal and physical abuse, beatings, torture, rape, isolation, imprisonment, and death are all examples of the persecution believers experience in many areas of the world. Some who have survived severe persecution have said that the knowledge that many others were praying for them was often a profound source of comfort and hope.

14. PRAYER: THREE PROBLEMS TO AVOID

Prayer should be a focal point in the life of every Christian, but there are some major ways in which we can misunderstand the nature of prayer and, as a result, fail to have our prayers heard. In this chapter we will look at three of these issues and the proper balance we need in the area of talking to God.*

Prayer Is Not Just About Reciting

In some of the world's religions prayer consists only of reciting memorized prayers. In some branches of Christianity this is common also, but we may want to think about this. If we understand that prayer is speaking to God, we will realize that always reciting the same words is not exactly a conversation. Jesus spoke against this, telling his followers: "when you pray, do not use vain repetitions as the heathen do" (Matthew 6:7 NKJV).

Jesus also coached his disciples on the subject of how to communicate with God by providing them with an outline or pattern for prayer that we know as "the Lord's Prayer," "the Disciples' Prayer," or simply as the "Our Father." But Jesus gave this teaching on two occasions and in slightly different forms, as we see in Matthew 6:5–13 and Luke 11:2–4. Although the two versions of the Lord's Prayer are similar, they are not identical, and the differences show that Jesus probably never intended his outline to be used primarily as a rote prayer.

Naturally, it is not wrong to pray the Lord's Prayer word-for-word, just as we might sometimes use some of the prayers in that way from the psalms or elsewhere, but meaningful prayer should also go beyond memorized or recited prayers to speak to God from our own hearts.

Prayer Is Not Just About Asking

The next great principle in understanding prayer as communication with God is that it is not just about asking for what we need or want. This may be very basic, but many people do not think enough about this fundamental aspect of prayer. If we look at the Lord's Prayer outline that Jesus gave to his disciples, it certainly involves asking for our needs (Matthew 6:11) – but not until we have offered praise to God and prayed for the things that are important in his sight. There are thousands of verses in the book of Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible that provide examples that show asking for things is only one part of the full range of what prayer is all about.

When we pray mainly to ask for things, our prayers are wrongly narrow and too focused on ourselves. The apostle James confirmed this when he wrote “when you do pray, your prayers are not answered, because you pray just for selfish reasons” (James 4:3 CEV). We may sometimes pray sincerely for real needs, not just our wants, but if our requests are routinely offered in isolation, they are unlikely to be granted.

For example, prayer should almost always include thanksgiving for what God has already given us rather than just requests for more – or other – things. The apostle Paul wrote “in every situation, by prayer and petition, *with thanksgiving*, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). We can imagine how our conversations with other people would not be very successful if all we ever did was ask them for things. Prayer should be a humble conversation with God that goes far beyond asking.

Prayer Is Not Just About Us

The second fundamental principle of prayer is one that we should naturally grow into in our Christian lives, but not all believers do. This is that prayer is about more than us – in fact, prayer should be *mainly* not about us. All the petitions in the Lord's Prayer guide are for “us” – in the plural – for the needs of others as well as our own.

And if we look at the book of Acts, we find something very interesting. Acts continually speaks of prayer in the church, but if we set aside the scriptures that simply tell us that the early church members prayed, and look only at verses telling us *what* they prayed, we find only two verses showing people praying for their own situations and twelve verses showing believers praying for the needs and welfare of others. This means that of the recorded prayers in Acts, some 83 percent are prayers on behalf of others rather than prayers for the individual who was offering the prayer.

Perhaps we would expect the ratio to be about fifty-fifty: praying for others just as much as for ourselves. But the 83 percent prayer for others we find in Acts is clear. And when we look at the writings of the apostle Paul, we find the principle corroborated. Paul speaks of prayer some fifty times in his epistles. When we look at the nature of the prayers Paul mentions we find only three instances of praying for one's own needs. Seven times Paul speaks of praying generally; but in some forty of the fifty instances (80 percent) where he mentions specific things being prayed about, we find him speaking of praying for others or urging people to do likewise. For example, Paul tells us that he and his fellow workers prayed constantly for the spiritual needs of others (Ephesians 6:18–20; 2 Thessalonians 1:11–12; etc.).

So, the pattern we found in Acts where we are told *what* people were praying for is repeated in the epistles of Paul where he so frequently tells what we *should* be praying for. These facts should speak to us. It is not a matter of attempting to establish Christian practice through statistics. It is simply acknowledging that of the prayers recorded and commanded in the New Testament church the great majority – somewhere around 80 percent – are prayers for others.

That is why we can think of this fact as the 80 percent principle of what we ask for in prayer. This does not mean we should not pray for our own needs – and in some circumstances, of course, our own needs may be urgent and take full precedence in what we ask. But the 80 percent principle opens a window for us to see how the

early church saw prayer; how Paul encouraged us to pray; and it gives added meaning to Jesus' words that we pray for "us" in the plural.

Balance in Prayer

When it comes to our personal communication with God, balanced prayer is more than always just reciting the same words. We may find written prayers helpful at times, but whenever possible we should speak directly to God as much as we can.

As we also saw, full and balanced prayer is also much more than just asking. The Lord's Prayer balances requests for what we need with other aspects of prayer such as praise and thanksgiving.

And when we do ask, we should not just be asking for ourselves, but for others also. We do not need to feel constrained to structure our prayers to a certain percentage, but if we are growing more and more like the One to whom we are praying, the chances are that our prayers will become increasingly full of the needs of others and reflect our concern for them. If our prayers are growing in that direction and we begin to see the needs of others as usually greater than our own, we can trust that God will hear and be pleased with the prayers we offer.

*For more information on this topic, download the free e-book *Your Call: Using the Direct Private Line of Prayer* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

15. PROPHECY: IS THE END NOW, OR LATER?

Many Christians are sure that the mysterious symbols that appear in prophetic biblical books such as Daniel, Ezekiel and Revelation represent people and events of the time in which they themselves are living. Often, these individuals sincerely begin to focus almost entirely on this understanding and may spend years of their lives attempting to correlate every significant detail of world news with specific prophecies and predictions – firmly believing that the return of Christ and the end of the age are, in fact, about to happen.

Other Christians may take the opposite approach – feeling that focusing on biblical prophecy is missing the point of what Christianity is really all about. These people may feel that most “end time” prophecies cannot be understood, or that they have already been fulfilled in some way, or that they apply only to some far distant future end of the world.

Is one of these opposite approaches correct, or is proper understanding and spiritual balance to be found somewhere between them? Every Christian should consider what history and the evidence of the Bible itself can teach us in this area, and we will look at each approach in turn.

The End is Near

Thousands of believers throughout history have looked at the Bible’s symbols and have come to think they showed that the end of the present age was definitely near – in AD 500 (Hippolytus of Rome), 793 (Beatus of Liébana), 1000 (Pope Sylvester II), 1260 (Joachim of Fiore), 1504 (Sandro Botticelli), 1757 (Emanuel Swedenborg), 1836 (John Wesley), 1844 (William Miller), 1891 (Joseph Smith), 1914 (the Jehovah’s Witnesses), 1975 (Herbert Armstrong), 1994 (Harold Camping), 2000 (Edgar Cayce), 2020 (Jeane Dixon) – or this year, or next. This is only an abbreviated list

– the truth is that *every generation* since the foundation of the New Testament church seems to have interpreted prophetic biblical symbols as reflecting the people and events of its time. This fact should be something that everyone who is convinced the end is in their own time should seriously consider.

Because of this belief that the end is near, some have become spiritually unbalanced – in worst-case scenarios neglecting their health and their families, selling their homes and possessions to try to “prepare,” or withdrawing from real life. Many others have sidetracked their own spiritual development, limited the degree to which they could help others, and ultimately hurt themselves or others in various ways.

The End Is Not Near

At the other extreme, the Bible predicts the world would reject the prophecies of Jesus’ return and the end of the age. The apostle Peter wrote:

in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing ... They will say, “Where is this ‘coming’ he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation” (2 Peter 3:3–4).

Sadly, even many Christians neglect a large part of the Bible by not focusing on prophecy at all. Over one quarter of the Bible is prophetic in nature and the biblical statement that “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16–17) includes those many hundreds of verses.

Yet many avoid the prophetic scriptures either consciously or subconsciously because they find the symbolism and verbal imagery utilized by the prophets to be difficult or impossible to understand. Prophecy can seem like an almost alien literary genre for those

unused to reading the Bible, and many shy away from the prophetic books feeling that they cannot be understood. In other cases, people have been “burned” by unsuccessful interpretations of prophecies and now actively avoid them, or they feel that prophecy is just not relevant to Christianity today.

The fact that Christ will return and institute the kingdom of God in the flow of human history is one of the most fundamental tenets of Christianity (John 14:1–3; 1 Thessalonians 4: 16–17; etc.). We cannot reject this biblical reality and truthfully claim to be a follower of Christ.

A Balanced View of Prophecy

Clearly, both extreme views of prophecy outlined here are unbalanced. The apostle Paul clearly tells us “Do not despise prophecies” (1 Thessalonians 5:20 ESV), but he also tells us that “As for prophecies, they will pass away” (1 Corinthians 13:8 ESV) – prophecy is not what is ultimately important. There is really no middle-of-the-road position that we can take in this situation, and true balance must be found in accepting the truth of both statements, the best part of *both* views.

First, we must not ignore or reject the Bible’s prophetic writings. For one thing, prophecy is much more than just the prediction of future events. The biblical prophets were the spokespersons for God who delivered many kinds of messages. A great deal of what many of the prophets have to say is regarding social problems of their day that are just as real in ours. Read Amos 5:7-24 for just one example.

The Old Testament prophets were also spiritual “marriage counselors” addressing problems of the divine husband-wife community of God’s relationship with his people (Isaiah 54:5; etc.). Their inspired advice is often just as relevant to our relationship with God today, even if the details may be different. And some of what the prophets say is good advice on the level of human marriage relations, too (Malachi 2:14–16, etc).

Not all prophecies are end time-oriented, of course. Many were clearly fulfilled in the past, and others appear to apply to the human condition throughout much of history. Many prophecies speak of restoration and renewal of the human relationship with God (see Isaiah 60, for example) and these find their apex in the many predictions of the promised Messiah. Just reading the Old Testament messianic prophecies can be tremendously illuminating and faith-strengthening. You may be surprised how much more the prophets say regarding Christ than what is quoted in the New Testament. Studying those passages can enrich our understanding of the life of the Son of God immeasurably.

Finally, we are instructed to “watch” (Matthew 24:42-44; etc.) and should know the basics of end of the age prophecy so that we are not ignorant if those things do come to pass in our lifetimes. But we must be careful here. The moment we begin to focus mainly on those prophecies we have lost balance and need to ask God to help us keep things in perspective. In one way, our lifetime is the “end time” for every Christian. We do not know when our lives will end, and we should live with the same urgency and dedication in our spiritual lives as if the end is indeed now (1 Peter 4:7). On the other hand, we should live physically as if the end is not yet (2 Thessalonians 2:2-4): we should not neglect our God-given health, responsibilities, and opportunities, or those of our families and others we can help.

Prophecy, like all areas of Scripture, can guide and inspire us – but we must always remember that it is only a quarter of the Bible. Whenever we spend much more than a quarter of our personal study of the Bible for a protracted period of time, or if we begin to focus more on world events than reaching and serving the world around us, we are probably losing spiritual balance. Prophecy is a gift that God has given us, but like all God’s gifts, it should be used wisely and never at the expense of our relationship with God and others.

16. PROSPERITY: IS IT PROMISED OR NOT?

The word of God contains hundreds of promises, many of which relate to the prosperity of those who obey him. Notice a single example from Deuteronomy 28 – the so-called “blessings and curses” chapter:

All these blessings will come on you and accompany you if you obey the LORD your God ... The LORD will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to. The LORD your God will bless you in the land he is giving you... The LORD will grant you abundant prosperity – in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your ground ... The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. (Deuteronomy 28:2–12)

These blessings of material prosperity and many others, which were promised to the people of Israel if they obeyed God, have often been used by those preaching the so-called “prosperity” or “health and wealth” gospel. This misunderstanding of biblical teaching places great emphasis on “claiming God’s promises” of abundance at the present time. While it originated in the U.S., the prosperity gospel has spread around the world and especially in parts of Africa, Asia, and Latin America where poverty is prevalent. But we need to understand what the Bible actually teaches about God’s blessings.

Is Physical Prosperity Promised?

There is no doubt that physical prosperity was promised to the people of ancient Israel if they obeyed God. Unfortunately, they

often did not obey, and the prosperity did not materialize. That is why we find God telling Israel:

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. (Malachi 3:10)

There is no doubt that many people have been materially blessed as a result of tithing or giving in this way, but there is also no doubt that the biblical promises were directed primarily toward the theocratic nation of Israel. That is why the New Testament does not speak in quite the same terms about physical prosperity. To be sure, the apostle John wrote: “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (3 John 1:2 NKJV), but that is not a promise of material prosperity – it was a common way to begin a letter in New Testament times, just as we might write “I hope you are well” to a friend today.

Although the Bible does show that God wants those who turn to him to enjoy good things (1 Timothy 6:17), physical blessings are by no means a guaranteed part of our present Christian life. In his wisdom, God allows many Christians to experience persecution, loss, illness, and physical discomfort in this life (2 Corinthians 4:16–18; Hebrews 10:32–34; etc.). The Bible teaches that in the next life God’s people will experience no evil of any kind, and everything good – but that is in the age to come (Revelation 21:1–4). In this life, the New Testament does not promise freedom from such evil, or physical abundance; but it teaches faithful perseverance despite problems and needs (1 Peter 1:6).

Unfortunately, the prosperity gospel is more than just a faulty doctrine. It has direct repercussions on how we live. It encourages believers to focus on the physical instead of the spiritual, to place their own desires rather than the needs of others at the center of their prayers, and to focus increasingly on what we hope to receive rather than what we can give. This twisting of the gospel often leads

believers to feel they are not loved by God or not doing something right if they do not enjoy health and prosperity. It also – even if only subconsciously – encourages the elevation of those whose lives exhibit health and wealth and a judgmental attitude toward those whose lives do not.

Although one of the leading founders and proponents of the prosperity gospel recently announced that he has seen the error of this teaching and has discontinued it, the doctrine continues to be followed by many around the world. We must all exercise care that we are not influenced by this message. The apostle Paul speaks bluntly about teachers who become “people of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is *a means to financial gain*” (1 Timothy 6:5). We must be careful, Paul warns us, never to use giving as a way to get, never to see generosity as a means to gain.

Spiritual Blessings Are Promised

On the other hand, while Jesus warned his followers “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15) and the New Testament contains many warnings against focusing on material prosperity (Matthew 6:19, 24; Luke 18:24; 1 Timothy 3:3; 6:10; Hebrews 13:5; etc.), the Bible does show that today God promises great prosperity to those who turn to him – in the form of spiritual blessings.

Romans 8:32 tells us: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” and the context of this verse is not one of material prosperity, but one of God graciously granting our spiritual needs. Paul explains this even more clearly in his letter to the Corinthian church: “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness (2 Corinthians 9:10 ESV). Notice how Paul uses the physical analogy of seed, sowing, and harvest, to teach the fact that God will provide an eventual

spiritual harvest of righteousness which is far more important than physical riches.

God may provide us with material prosperity in this life, but he may not. That is in his hands as he acts according to his wisdom and purposes. Financial prosperity may certainly be a blessing to be thankful for when it is granted, but we should never make it our goal in life or be disheartened if it is not granted to us. Like Paul, we should be able to say “I know how to get along with little, and I also know how to live in prosperity ... both of having abundance and suffering need” (Philippians 4:12 NASB).

And if we are blessed with physical abundance and prosperity in this life, we should remember that we are being given an opportunity not to hoard or squander wealth selfishly, but to give more and to truly be a blessing to others (see Chapter 5, “Giving”). Only our response to physical prosperity determines whether it will prove to be a blessing or not, and a balanced approach of enjoying and sharing prosperity is always necessary.

17. RIGHTEOUSNESS: DOING RIGHT THE RIGHT WAY

The apostle John tells us that just as God is righteous, the believer practices righteousness, also (1 John 2:29). But, just as in many other areas of Christian life, we need balance in our understanding and application of the central spiritual quality of righteousness – and in two of its aspects in particular.

First, we must realize that we need balance in positioning ourselves properly between the ditch of unrighteousness and the opposite ditch of self-righteousness. As pastor and author John Ortberg has written in a different context, “One of the hardest things in the world is to stop being the prodigal son without turning into the elder brother” (John Ortberg in *The Life You’ve Always Wanted*). The prodigal son lived a life of unrighteousness before repenting, but his seemingly more righteous brother was guilty of self-righteousness (Luke 15:11–32).

The righteousness God wants to see in our lives is situated firmly between these two ditches. While we may all have to work to avoid or overcome unrighteous behavior, self-righteousness is also an ongoing danger we may fall into, but the biblical answers to these predicaments are clear. The greatest enemy of unrighteous living is a proper understanding of God’s law and how it is fulfilled (see Chapter 11, “Law”) and the greatest enemy of self-righteousness is humility (see Chapter 9, “Humility”). With God’s help we can maintain proper balance in these areas.

Why Human Righteousness Is Not Good Enough

A somewhat less obvious, but equally important aspect of righteousness where we need balance is that of the *nature* of the righteousness in our lives. It is one of the hardest things for the natural human mind to comprehend that our own righteousness is not good enough in God’s sight. Shocking as it may seem, the book

of Isaiah shows that human righteousness may sometimes even be offensive to God: “all our righteous acts are like filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6), and the apostle Paul tells us: “There is no one righteous, not even one.” (Romans 3:10).

So why is it that our righteousness is not good enough, and what does that mean for our Christian lives and our efforts to obey God? The Bible indicates there are a number of reasons why human righteousness does not measure up to God’s perfect standard.

1. *We do right in the wrong way:* In Genesis we find Cain and Abel both sacrificed to God, yet Cain’s sacrifice – his “good deed” – was not accepted: “The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor” (Genesis 4:4-5). God made it clear to Cain that his offering was not given as it should have been, but Cain was indignant and angry and doubtless felt his good deed was as good as that of his brother. Throughout the Old Testament we find many stories of right things being done the wrong way, and the fact that God was not pleased with this kind of human “righteousness.” In our own lives we may not exhibit the problem to such a noticeable degree, but how many of us as parents, for example, always discipline our children perfectly? All too often we do right in the wrong way.

2. *We do right at the wrong time:* Humanly we may think that if actions or behavior are good, they are good at any time, but the story of ancient Israel’s failure in this area is instructive. When God commanded Israel to take the Promised Land, the people balked in fear (Deuteronomy 1:31-40). It was only later that they said “We will go up and fight, as the LORD our God commanded us” (Deuteronomy 1:41). But it was too late – God was not with them, and they were defeated (vs. 43-45). Examples such as this may seem extreme compared to our own lives, but how many of us have put off doing something we know we should do? Good deeds done when convenient, or when we see an advantage or no further disadvantage, are not really deeds of righteousness.

3. *We do right to the wrong degree:* We can err in this way from one of two extremes. On the one hand we can do right but not sufficiently or without truly being committed to what we do. It is said of King Amaziah of ancient Israel that: “he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, but not wholeheartedly” (2 Chronicles 25:2). Such unzealous “righteousness” is lacking in God’s eyes, but we can also fail by being *overly* zealous! Many individuals have dedicated themselves to prayer and Bible study at the expense of helping others, not realizing that such intense focus on their own spiritual lives is not the kind of outgoing, giving and serving righteousness that God wants to see in us.

4. *We do right for the wrong reasons:* We see this in the story of Ananias and Sapphira who gave some money to the Church as if it were the full amount they had received (Acts 5:1-11). This story is an example of deception and lying to the Holy Spirit (verses 7-8), but it is just as much an example of doing good to be seen by others – to be appreciated and approved by them. Jesus continually condemned the Pharisees of his day for this same problem – saying “Everything they do is done for people to see” (Matthew 23:5) and warning his disciples: “Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them” (Matthew 6:1). If we have ever given charitably because it was expected, or done any good deed thinking of an advantage or return from the act – we have discovered that we can do right for the wrong reasons.

These failures – and doubtless others – that limit or spoil many of our good deeds are the reason the apostle Paul wrote: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law” (Romans 3:20).

True Righteousness

Considering how difficult it is for human nature to do right for the right reasons can be discouraging. Fortunately, the answer to the

problem is found in understanding true righteousness. When Paul tells us his goal was “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9) he makes it clear that there really are two kinds of righteousness – ours and God’s. As Paul explains, “But now apart from the law the righteousness of God ... is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:20-22). We must, Paul tells us, “put on the new self, created to be like God in *true righteousness* and holiness” (Ephesians 4:24).

But does this mean that if Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us, we do not need to worry about trying to live righteously? To paraphrase the apostle Paul: “What then, should we not try to be righteous?” (Romans 6:15: “What then, shall we sin?”) Like Paul, we might answer “God forbid!” This is where balance comes into this area of Christian life. We must trust God completely for the righteousness of Jesus Christ – we will never gain that perfect righteousness through our own efforts – but we must continue to strive for righteousness, nevertheless (see Chapter 12, “Perfection”).

The apostle John tells us “Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did” (1 John 2:6), and it is to the degree that Christ is “in” us” (2 Corinthians 13:5), that we will have the Spirit of God motivating and guiding our thoughts, words, and deeds (Ezekiel 36:26-27). It is through the Holy Spirit that God’s love flows through us and helps us to fulfill his law of righteousness (Romans 13:10, Galatians 5:14). The same love of God that perfectly kept the law of God in Christ can also move us ever closer to true righteousness if we let it (Romans 5:5). But we need to keep close enough to God to let that love be constantly present in our lives. It is to the degree that we are walking with him that we find the Son of God does live in us and that through God’s help we are able to grow and live more righteously – doing what is right the right way, at the right time, to the right degree, and for the right reasons.

18. SALVATION: IS IT ASSURED OR CAN IT BE LOST?

Whether salvation can be lost or not after a person has turned to God is not just a doctrinal issue. As we will see in this chapter, this is an issue that can affect our Christian living in a number of ways, so it is important that we understand it and where balance lies in applying our understanding.

Is Salvation Assured?

The idea that “once saved, we are always saved” is believed by many Christians, but is this belief in the unchangeable assurance of salvation biblical? Jesus told his disciples “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27–28). But this is speaking of someone else trying to take a believer away from God – it does not address whether believers themselves can turn from God. And when Jesus said “whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life” (John 5:24), he speaks of the certainty of salvation for those who pass from death to life, but that does not prove they could not pass back from the life they have been given.

In the same way, the apostle Paul wrote “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). But notice that these are all external factors, and Paul does not speak of what we ourselves might do. God will certainly still love us, whatever we do, but that does not prove we will have eternal life if we permanently rebel against him.

In every case, scriptures like these that are used to support the idea that salvation cannot be lost do not clearly state this at all. On the other hand, scriptures that indicate the opposite are numerous and very clear.

Can Salvation Be Lost?

The apostle Paul answered this question for us when he wrote that God “has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation— if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel” (Colossians 1:22–23). The epistle to the Hebrews makes this even clearer:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Hebrews 6:4–6)

This passage shows unequivocally that those who have repented and turned to God and in whom the Holy Spirit resides can fall away and then cannot be renewed. Hebrews later hammers this same point home:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the

covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Hebrews 10:26–29)

So those who have experienced salvation can willfully sin afterward and can then receive punishment and loss of what they had been given. We can be given a gift that is ours to keep for eternity and still throw it away. But sinning “deliberately” or “willfully” (as many older translations put it) does not refer to isolated examples of falling down and then repenting of our mistakes. Sinning deliberately means that we have no desire to repent, and that we choose sin not in moments of weakness but in ongoing unrepentant rebellion.

That is why the New Testament tells us “the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:22; and see also Matthew 24:13; Mark 13:13), and “We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.” (Hebrews 3:14). It also shows us that those who have turned to God must still remain on guard because “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning” (2 Peter 2:20). Once granted, our salvation is secure unless we ourselves chose to negate it.

The Balance that Comes from Understanding

So how does the understanding of whether salvation can be lost affect our daily Christian lives? The answer is simply that if we believe salvation cannot be lost, we do not focus on the change God wants to see in our lives, and we may begin to wither spiritually and then we are endangered (John 15:1–6). On the other hand, if we believe salvation can be lost, we must be careful that we are not drawn into seeking salvation through our own efforts, or that we do not begin to live in fear that we may have lost our salvation when we fall down.

Proper balance in this area of our Christian lives is based on the understanding that it is possible to lose our salvation, so we must be watchful that we do not fall away, and that we continue faithfully dedicated to God despite any and all temptations and trials that may beset us. Proper balance understands that isolated failures and sins that are truly repented of are not the “sinning deliberately” of which Hebrews warns us. That is a form of the unpardonable sin the Bible speaks about, but it is not something we need live in fear of committing. If we are worried that we might have lost our salvation, we doubtless have not done so if we still desire to submit to God and to walk with him.

But we must continue to choose God’s way of life and to walk with God as well as possible, whatever may come. That is why James tells us “Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him” (James 1:12). Of that, we can be assured.

19. SEX: WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS

The subject of sex is perhaps one in which there are more different viewpoints among Christians than any other. At one extreme, some branches of Christianity teach that sex was the original sin and that it is wrongful in any circumstance other than for producing children. At the other extreme, many Christians today have accepted the viewpoint of the world around them and regard sex as little more than a purely physical pleasure. If this is hard to believe, consider the fact that a Pew Research study conducted in 2020 found that half of U.S. Christians say casual sex between consenting adults is sometimes or always acceptable. Where is the biblical balance in this situation?

Prohibitions and Principles

The Bible tells us that God commanded the first man and woman to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1:28), and this command was given before the first sin – which could not, therefore, have been sex. But in addition to propagating the human race, God also designed sex to enable physical, emotional, and spiritual bonding and union between a man and woman (Genesis 2:18, 23–24; Matthew 19:4–6; 1 Corinthians 7:5). So the Bible shows that sex itself, by intent and design, is important, honorable, and good (Hebrews 13:4).

Unfortunately, as with all God’s gifts to humanity, sex has been greatly misused and as a result a number of prohibitions and warnings regarding its improper use are to be found in both the Old and New Testaments. Sexual relations were prohibited between close relatives (Leviticus 18:6; Mark 6:18), between those of the same sex (Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26–27), and between people and animals (Leviticus 18:23; Romans 1:29). In addition, adultery – sex with anyone other than one’s marital partner – (Leviticus

20:10–12; Matthew 5:27–28), “fornication” – sex between unmarried individuals (Exodus 22:16; Ephesians 5:3–5), prostitution (Deuteronomy 23:18; 1 Corinthians 6:16–17) and rape (Deuteronomy 22:25–29) were also forbidden. A side note here is that the story found in Genesis 38 – of a man who refused to impregnate his deceased brother’s childless wife as he was legally bound to do (Deuteronomy 25:5–6) – has nothing to do with birth-control as is sometimes claimed. In context, the story is clearly given to condemn the wicked selfishness of the individual who did not want to have to provide for a child who was not his own.

The principles behind the biblical prohibitions listed above also show us aspects of sexual behavior that we should shun, even though they are not specifically mentioned in the Scriptures. For example, the law against adultery obviously forbids in principle any kind of mate-swapping or group sex. In the same way, the injunctions against adultery and fornication show that use of pornography is wrong.

Sadly, today, pornography use has reached epidemic proportions within as well as outside the church, but this should not be. Even apart from the Bible’s clear guidance on the matter – Jesus’ words that “anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28) are unequivocal – it is well known that pornography destroys the ability to form and maintain healthy relationships for both men and women, and has other far-reaching and harmful effects ranging from the exploitation and abuse of those involved in the pornography industry to fueling the evil of sex trafficking. Those who feel that use of pornography does not affect anyone but themselves are badly mistaken.

Biblical Guidelines

On the other hand, Scripture does not legislate or go into detail as to what a husband and wife are allowed or not allowed to do sexually in their marriage. Often people search the Scriptures for

verses on topics the Bible simply does not cover, but that does not mean that God's word does not offer us guidance. Rather than giving explicit details as to acceptable sexual behavior, the Bible gives us clear principles that can answer questions we may have. We can summarize those principles by affirming that sex is good and right when it is:

1. *Not biblically proscribed.* The biblical laws regarding proscribed sex (Leviticus 18; etc.) are few but clear and are not negotiable. For example, adultery or any other sin is always wrong even if one or both partners in a marriage are willing or desirous to accept it. On the other hand, we should not presume that everything not specifically mentioned in the Bible is somehow proscribed.

2. *Always consensual.* The principle of "mutual consent" is seen in Paul's words: "Do not deprive each other except perhaps *by mutual consent* and for a time" (1 Corinthians 7:5). In regard to what married couples do in their sexual lives, mutual consent always applies, but this does not mean that unless we feel like sex our mate has no right to desire or ask for intimacy (as Paul's words clearly show).

3. *Not purely for self-gratification.* Paul's words directly before his comment on mutual consent are instructive: "The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:3-4). Although it is not a popular view today, as Christians we must realize that our bodies are not our own – they belong to God (1 Corinthians 6:18-20) and it is God's will that we give them to each other in marriage.

4. *Always based in love.* Sex without love is never what God intended. We should also remember that while the world looks at

sex as something we get, the Christian view is the exact opposite – it is something we give and share. The biblical Song of Songs shows that physical love between a man and woman can have great latitude, but it also continually shows that the physical relationship it pictures is one of love (Song of Songs 1:2; and throughout the book).

When these balancing guidelines are followed, we can be confident regarding what is acceptable in the physical union of marriage – the Bible is clear in its prohibitions and gives us simple principles to follow that cover everything else. Overall, as Christians, we must remember that sex should honor God as well as please us. Our bodies were not given to us to be controlled by selfish passions (Colossians 3:5) or used for sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:12–13), but there is nothing shameful or dishonorable about sex. As long as a married couple's sexual practices are not biblically proscribed, are consensual, are not done purely for self-gratification, and are based in love, they are doubtless honorable and can contribute to the loving union that sex was intended to create.

20. TRUST: GOD'S PART AND OURS

God's word tells us we can trust him completely (Numbers 23:19), and the Bible gives hundreds of examples of this being the case. Christians accept this. But is trust in God something we do in our minds and then simply wait on God to do what is necessary, or do we have a part to play in the process?

Many Christians have believed that in any problematic situation where we ask God's help, we should trust him entirely and wait patiently for his help to materialize. As a result, some have felt that even in extreme situations, seeking medical or other help is a lack of trust and faith, but is that what the word of God shows to be the case? Consider three biblical examples from the lives of faithful servants of God: a righteous king, a prophet, and Jesus himself.

Hezekiah and the Threat of Invasion

Hezekiah – one of ancient Judah's very few good kings – ruled around 700 BC in a time of international unrest. When Jerusalem was threatened by the rising Assyrian war-machine, Hezekiah took action. Second Chronicles tells us:

After all that Hezekiah had so faithfully done, Sennacherib king of Assyria came and invaded Judah. He laid siege to the fortified cities, thinking to conquer them for himself. When Hezekiah saw that Sennacherib had come and that he intended to wage war against Jerusalem, he consulted with his officials and military staff about blocking off the water from the springs outside the city, and they helped him ... Then he worked hard repairing all the broken sections of the wall and building towers on it. He built another wall outside that one

and reinforced the terraces of the City of David. He also made large numbers of weapons and shields. (2 Chronicles 32:1–5)

These preparations for war were extensive, and some of them have been confirmed archaeologically, but looking to what he could do physically was not all Hezekiah did. Second Chronicles tells us he encouraged the people of Jerusalem with these words of faith: “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him ... with us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles” (2 Chronicles 32:7–8). So, when an Assyrian siege of Jerusalem looked inevitable:

King Hezekiah and the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz cried out in prayer to heaven ... So the LORD saved Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem from the hand of Sennacherib king of Assyria and from the hand of all others. (2 Chronicles 32:20–22)

God worked a great miracle to protect Jerusalem under Hezekiah, but the Bible makes it clear that the king did everything within his own power to help the situation, as well as calling to God in faith for the additional help that was clearly needed.

Nehemiah and Jerusalem’s Walls

The Bible tells us that some two hundred and fifty years later, another man of God, the prophet Nehemiah, acted in the same way. After the time of Hezekiah, Judah’s sins led to the eventual conquering and captivity of her people by the Babylonians. When God made a way for the Jews to return to Jerusalem from their Babylonian captivity, they faced a great problem. The kings and governors of the areas surrounding Jerusalem resisted the Jews’ return and their attempts to rebuild the protective walls of Jerusalem. Plots against the Jews grew, and the situation looked

very bad. But notice the reaction of Nehemiah and the individuals of faith at that time. First, they called to God for help (Nehemiah 4:4–5), then they immediately set about doing what they could to help themselves: “So we rebuilt the wall ... for the people worked with all their heart” (Nehemiah 4:6).

After praying for God’s help, Nehemiah and his fellow Jews clearly worked as hard as they could in doing what they themselves could do. The situation is summed up perfectly in one illuminating verse of Nehemiah’s account regarding the response of these righteous individuals to the impending threat: “we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (Nehemiah 4:9). God honored the faith of these people in asking for his help – along with doing what they could do themselves – and saved the people of Jerusalem from a dire threat.

The Miracles of Jesus

Some four hundred and fifty years later we come to the time of Jesus. Here we see again the same pattern of doing what we can do ourselves as well as looking to God for what we cannot do. We find this repeatedly in situations where Jesus performed miracles by having people do what they could – or at least something to have them play a part in the process – then providing his miraculous power to fulfill the need.

Look, for example, at Jesus’ first recorded miracle when he turned large jars of water into wine. Jesus did not just create jars of wine for this event (John 2:1–11), he commanded that jars of water be brought – making the wedding hosts do what they could do themselves – and then used his divine power to turn the water to wine to fulfill the need. In the miracle of feeding the 5,000 (John 6:5–15; etc. – the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospels) we see the same thing. When a need arose to feed the hungry crowds that followed Jesus to hear his teaching, we see that he did not simply command so that ample food miraculously appeared. The feeding of the 5,000 is also known as the “miracle of

the five loaves and two fish” because Jesus asked what food the people already had, then taking that, multiplied it miraculously so there was enough for everyone.

This pattern is repeated many times in the gospel accounts of Christ’s miracles, and we see Jesus applying the same principle himself. When Jesus knew he would be endangered going up to a festival in Jerusalem, he did not just command some kind of stealth or invisibility for himself, but went up secretly (John 7:10) – doing what he could physically and doubtless trusting God for any further needed protection. When he healed lepers and blind men, he did not just pronounce a healing, but reached out his hand and touched the individuals (Matthew 8:3). In one case he even made mud and put it on the person’s eyes and told the individual to go wash himself (John 9:6–7) – often acting, or having someone else act, before granting the healing.

Balancing Trust and Action

All these biblical examples – and many more – show a clear partnership between our trust in God and our doing what we can. Sadly, many very sincere people have caused themselves and others unnecessary hardship through not understanding this principle of trusting God and at the same time doing what we can do ourselves. Some have denied themselves or others medical help when it was available (see Chapter 6, “Healing”), neglected to protect themselves when they could have done so,* or otherwise caused unnecessary harm or suffering.

But the examples the Bible gives all show that God does not look at our efforts to do what we can do in difficult situations as a lack of faith. Rather, he often helps us to the extent that we are doing what we can to the fullest of our abilities. This principle has sometimes been summarized as seeking divine help as though there is no physical help available, and seeking physical help as though there is no divine help available.

It is not a lack of faith to do what we can do ourselves. It is a sound biblical principle of working in partnership with God: of doing what we can do, and trusting God – from the beginning – for the rest.

* For more information on this topic, download the free e-book *The Christian and Self-Defense* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

21. TRUTH: HOW WE SPEAK IT

The Scriptures clearly and repeatedly teach that lying – saying something that is untrue – is wrong (Psalm 31:18; 63:11; 101:7; 119:29; Proverbs 6:17; 12:22; 19:5, 9; Zechariah 8:16; John 8:44; Ephesians 4:25; 1 John 2:21; Revelation 21:27; 22:15 to mention only a few examples!). But, apart from legal contexts such as a court of law where we promise to tell *the whole* truth, does the Bible teach that we must always tell all the truth – that it is lying if we do not speak everything we know about a situation? And is it lying to tell the truth in such a way as to shield people from embarrassment or pain?

Many new believers, and even those who have been Christians for a number of years, have not thought this through. Sometimes, in their desire to do what is right, people unnecessarily harm themselves or others either by saying more than necessary, or saying things more undiplomatically than need be – when doing so can have unfortunate or even serious consequences.

Truth and Consequences

First, consider the classic moral question: “Should a person give a full and true answer if asked if they know the whereabouts of innocent individuals being hunted by those who would clearly harm them” (as in World War II Nazi hunts for Jews in hiding)? Most Christians can see the need for withholding known facts in situations like this, and there are biblical precedents for such behavior. The story of the midwives protecting the newborn male Israelites in Egypt (Exodus 1:15–21) and the woman Rehab protecting the Israelite spies (Joshua 2:4–6, 6:17, 25) are two such cases.

The clearest example of this is where God himself instructed the prophet Samuel to withhold information that might endanger him. In the book of Samuel we read that after Israel's first king, Saul, sinned and disqualified himself from kingship, God told his servant Samuel to go to Bethlehem to anoint the young David as the new king. Samuel was naturally worried about the repercussions of doing this and said: "How can I go? If Saul hears about it, he will kill me" (I Samuel 16:2). God replied to Samuel with instructions on how to handle the situation: "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.' Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate."

Here it is God himself telling Samuel that rather than speaking the whole truth about why he was going to Bethlehem, he should simply speak something equally true, but not the part of the truth that was problematic. Had Samuel told all the truth to Saul in this situation, his life may well have been endangered, and at the very least he would probably have been blocked from doing what God had instructed him to do.

Truth and Love

But while it may be easy to see the morality of withholding information in cases where we or others might be endangered by what we say, what about situations where lives are not endangered, but telling everything we know, or not telling it in the right way, may cause unhappiness if not actual harm? We must be particularly careful in situations such as these, but once again there may be biblical precedent to guide us.

Genesis 18 tells the story of how the patriarch Abraham was visited by three "men" – one of whom was clearly God himself in human form (Genesis 18:1–15). In this well-known story, the Lord announces to Abraham that despite his advanced age (Abraham was some 90 years old at this time), God would give him a son and heir. Hearing this, Abraham's wife, Sarah, who was nearby "...

laughed to herself, saying, ‘After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?’” (Genesis 18:12 ESV).

We are then told that the Lord asked Abraham “...Why did Sarah laugh and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’” (vs. 13). Interestingly, the Lord did not repeat Sarah’s exact words or her complete statement, only what was necessary for his purposes. He did not repeat Sarah’s specific comments on her own condition or Abraham’s, which would have been embarrassing and perhaps hurtful if repeated.

This would seem to be a clear example that it is sometimes not wrong to withhold the whole truth from someone – without saying anything untrue – when all of the truth might be hurtful or distressing. In exactly this way, as parents we might not give our young children all the facts of a medical report or what a doctor tells us regarding a child’s illness.

We see this careful withholding of information in the Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. John’s Gospel tells us that prior to a religious festival in Jerusalem Jesus told his family members: “You go to the festival. I am not going up to this festival, because my time has not yet fully come” (John 7:8). However, a few verses later we read that “... after his brothers had left for the festival, he went also, not publicly, but in secret” (John 7:10). The secrecy involved in Jesus’ actions indicate that he may well have gone separately in order to protect his family members from danger he knew he might bring on them, but John makes it clear that in order to protect them in this way it was necessary for Jesus not to tell them all the truth regarding his plans at that point.

We do not have the perfect character and wisdom of the Son of God, of course, so scriptures such as these are not invitations to “juggle with the truth” using our own human understanding as we go through life. But what the biblical examples do show us is that sometimes it is not wrong to withhold specific information that might endanger, hurt, or embarrass others. The Bible shows that, of itself, this is not lying.

Balancing Truth with Wisdom

We should not confuse the courtroom protocol to tell “the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth” with what God has revealed. Naturally, in any legal situation, If we give our word that we will tell the whole truth, that is what we should do, but life is not a courtroom. There are times when it is simply better to refrain from speaking the truth if the truth does not need to be spoken. In the same way, it is not wrong to word statements and answers in such a way as to protect individuals who might be hurt if we were to speak the truth carelessly and without concern for others.

We should always speak the truth when we do speak, but the truth, or all of it, does not always need to be spoken, and truth often needs to be spoken with care. This is an important part of the principle of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15), and it is also a clear example of what Christ meant in saying that in our dealings with others we should be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16 NKJV).*

* For more information on this topic, download the free e-book *The Power of Speech: The Potent Force that Every Christian Is Called to Use Wisely!* from FreeChristianEBooks.org.

22. WITNESSING: BALANCING WORDS WITH WISDOM

Jesus' final words before his ascension, as recorded in the book of Acts – “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) – make it clear that his followers were commissioned to serve as witnesses of his life, death, and resurrection, and the significance of these events for all of humankind.

Fulfilling Christ's commission to speak on his behalf is not a responsibility that should be taken lightly, but well-meaning Christians often hurt their witness through avoidable mistakes, and so this chapter looks at some ways that balance is needed in witnessing.

Balance in Preparation

When Jesus gave his disciples their great commission, they had already studied with him for some three years, they had heard the gospel explained and expounded by Jesus himself, and they were well prepared to convey the message that had been given to them. The point for us today is that we too need to be prepared if we are to properly fulfill the commission of witness. Sometimes, although with good intentions, people who are new to the truth do not convey the gospel message properly because they do not yet fully understand it. The New Testament story of how Priscilla and Aquila had to instruct the enthusiastic but not completely prepared Apollos is a perfect example of this fact (Acts 18:24–28).

This is why Paul impressed on the young Timothy the importance of “rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 ESV) and why it is important that we understand the essential aspects of the gospel before we attempt to share it. On the other hand, we do not need to wait until we have achieved “perfect” understanding of the Bible before we begin to witness to the gospel

– all of us are (or should be) growing continually in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18), so no one has “perfect” understanding.

In the same way, we should never feel that our own lives and behavior are not perfect enough to tell others the good news of salvation. We should always be careful not to speak hypocritically – saying one thing and doing another – but Jesus nowhere said his followers must be perfect to serve as his witnesses. In fact, our own imperfection and Christ’s perfection is part of the gospel message we are called to share! So Jesus’ command “let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16) does not mean that we must be spiritually perfect for our actions and behavior to influence others for good, and it certainly does not mean that if we are imperfect, we are unworthy to witness verbally.

Balancing Actions with Words

You have doubtless heard the saying “preach the gospel at all times; if necessary, use words.” But while that thought may be well-intentioned, it can be a misleading idea. Our lives certainly should witness to the work of Christ’s Spirit in us (Matthew 5:16), but unless others know we are Christians, we may only appear to be “good people” to them. This is why the apostle Peter could write: “Wives ... submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Peter 3:1–2). In situations like the one Peter describes, the unconverted people know that their mates are Christians.

In any case, complete evangelism takes place only when the message of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection is conveyed. We see this fact continually in the Scriptures, but nowhere more clearly than in the writings of Paul. The apostle tells us, for example: “faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Romans 10:17). Paul also stresses: “It is

written: ‘I believed; therefore I have spoken.’ Since we have that same spirit of faith, we also believe and therefore speak” (2 Corinthians 4:13). A final example from Paul’s writing undeniably shows the necessity of proclaiming rather than simply living the gospel: “just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak” (1 Thessalonians 2:4 ESV).

It is true that actions sometimes speak louder than words, but in other situations words are our best option – or even the only way we can convey the gospel. We should always be prepared to let our light shine in words (1 Peter 3:15) as well as in actions.

Balancing Witnessing with Wisdom

While it is not wrong to share the gospel with others in whatever setting we may find ourselves, it is usually better that it is not done indiscriminately. The book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is a time to be silent and a time to speak (Ecclesiastes 3:7), and that certainly applies to Christian witness. Jesus talked about the principle of not giving sacred or spiritual things to those who are obviously going to reject them (Matthew 7:6), and it is clear that he often did not preach to people when he had opportunity to do so (Matthew 5:1; Luke 5:16; John 11:53–54; etc.). It is better to choose the time, place, and opportunity to share the gospel carefully rather than to feel that if we are simply around people, we should be witnessing to them.

A related principle to keep in mind is that it is preferable, whenever possible, to use a natural conversational opportunity to talk to others about Christ rather than to suddenly accost them with religious statements or questions. Extreme examples of this (such as “Repent or you will go to hell” or “Have you given your heart to the Lord?”) frequently arouse hostility in people and doom the effort to introduce them to the gospel. The apostle Peter doubtless had this fact in mind when he wrote: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter

3:15). Here, Peter places the emphasis on letting the unconverted person be the initiator of the discussion, and while that is not always necessary, it is certainly an ideal situation. And, of course, answering with respect – as Peter urges us – precludes berating people about sin or the kind of “in your face” presentation of the truth of salvation that many well-intentioned believers participate in.

Reading how Jesus guided his conversations with people such as the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4:4–26) can teach us a great deal about how we should present the truth to others. We can also lead conversations toward the point where others will ask questions. In any case, a great many natural opportunities arise in everyday conversation. For example, to a coworker offering condolences when they heard we had lost a relative, we can say “Thank you, but as a Christian I believe that just as Jesus was resurrected, so my relative will be – so I do not grieve as many people do who do not have this hope.” That kind of statement gives a totally natural opening for a conversation about the gospel if the other person seems interested. In the same way we can bring up some aspect of our beliefs when discussing books, activities, or in dozens of other ways.

Yet we should not feel under any kind of pressure to try to bring people to Christ quickly. The book of Acts gives us a good example of that fact when it records an important conversation between Paul and the Jewish king, Agrippa, who asked Paul:

“Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” Paul replied, “Short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am” (Acts 26:28–29)

In saying this, Paul showed that he felt no unreasonable urgency to bring Agrippa and others to Christ – just a desire for that outcome, however long it might take. Ultimately, we cannot convert people – only God can do that. In 2 Corinthians 4:4 Paul tells us: “The god of

this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” Nevertheless, despite the pervasive spiritual blindness, God frequently chooses to empower our efforts when we desire to help others to come to the light. We are all called to share what we have been given, and the truth of the gospel is certainly the most valuable gift that we can ever share.

23. WORK AND REST: FINDING THE BALANCE WE ALL NEED

In today's leisure-loving culture, many avoid work – or would if they could – and work is often regarded as one of the less desirable aspects of life. On the other hand, many become obsessive about or trapped in their work and needlessly hurt themselves and their families as a result. Even Christians can suffer from these wrongful approaches to work and rest, but the Bible shows us the balance we need in this area of our lives.

The Need to Work

The book of Genesis opens by first introducing God – then showing that he is a God who works. In a way, this is the Bible's first great lesson. Jesus himself confirmed that “My Father is still working, and I am working also” (John 5:17 CSB). Work is clearly a part of the very nature of God – not work for the sake of it, but work to create, expand, and share what he is and has (Psalm 104:24). God not only worked to make humanity, but now continues to work to make us more like him (1 Corinthians 12:6; Philippians 1:6; 2:13; etc.).

Work is also a fundamental aspect of God's design for humankind itself. In the Garden of Eden story told in Genesis we see that humanity was placed in an original paradise “to work it and take care of it” (Genesis 2:15), but the nature of much of that work changed after humans sinned (Genesis 3:17–19), and what should be a source of joy and fulfillment became tiring toil for many. The author of Ecclesiastes describes this situation when he wrote “What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest” (Ecclesiastes 2:22–23). But Ecclesiastes also shows that work does not have to be joyless and that if it is done with a right attitude, it is possible for people to

“find satisfaction in all their toil – this is the gift of God... there is nothing better for a person than to enjoy their work” (Ecclesiastes 3:13, 22). Certainly, the value of and need for work continue, and the apostle Paul has much to say about this in his second letter to the Thessalonian church:

For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone’s food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you... in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate. For ... “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.” We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive... Such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:7–12)

Paul also wrote “Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need” (Ephesians 4:28). In context, from Paul’s perspective, “anyone who has been stealing” means not just an actual thief, but anyone who is able to work but who deceitfully chooses to subsist on the work of others.

Jesus urged his followers to work hard and often stressed the need for this (John 9:4; 14:12; etc.). For the Christian, the need to work should be self-evident – God calls us to do the work he has given us and, whatever our vocation, he shows that we glorify him in the work we do: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters ... It is the Lord Christ you are serving” (Colossians 3:23–24). It is possible to enjoy our work if our attitude is one of wanting God’s purposes for us to be fulfilled (Philippians 2:13), wanting to support ourselves and our families (1 Timothy 5:8), and wanting to help others (Hebrews 13:16).

The Need to Rest

If work is one of the first lessons of the Bible, rest may be the second. We are told that immediately after God completed his work of creation: “on the seventh day he rested from all his work. Then God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work of creating that he had done” (Genesis 2:2). This was not because God was tired, of course (Isaiah 40:28), but as an illustration – because he knew humans would need to rest and so he sanctified doing exactly that. The importance of the Sabbath rest is seen in the fact that it was included in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8–11) – God’s summary of the most important parts of his instruction to that point.

In the New Testament we find Jesus not only kept the Sabbath rest, but also – although he was willing and desirous to work to the point of weariness (John 4:6) – when he felt it was necessary he rested and instructed his disciples to do the same. When his disciples became overly weary, he told them “Come with me ... to a quiet place and get some rest” (Mark 6:31).

In this age of frantically paced lifestyles and intensely pressuring jobs, we may have to learn the lesson that we need to rest and if we take a day off, the world will not come to a sudden halt. Physically we need regular rest to be able to perform optimally when we do work. Psychologically we need to rest to be able to keep proper perspective in life. Emotionally we need rest to be at peace. And spiritually we need rest, too (Hebrews 4:9–10). In fact, there is no lastingly deep and meaningful rest without our relationship with God.

That is why, when God took the people of Israel to be a nation, he told them: “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14). In the same way, Jesus told those who would follow him: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). That principle is just as true for the people of God today as it was then – we need rest and if we walk with God and his presence is with us, we will have rest.

Balancing Work and Rest

So, the Bible not only rebukes those who will not work (Proverbs 6:6–11; etc.), but it also commands us to rest. Both work and rest are necessary but must be balanced. The New Testament shows that Jesus encouraged his followers to work, and he never utilized the miraculous power at his disposal to avoid work. Rather, he worked hard, and his demanding schedule sometimes resulted in weariness – but he also rested and told his followers to do the same. Luke shows us that Jesus not only correctly balanced work and rest, but encouraged others in the importance of this:

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed." (Luke 10:38–42)

Today it is more important than ever that we follow Jesus' example and teaching in this area. The Christian must ask "How much time should I spend making a living, and how much time should I spend making a life?" "How much of my life should I spend on what is not necessary, and how much time should I spend on the few things that are?" It is only as we assess and order our lives in this way that we will achieve proper balance.

The "few things" that we must prioritize are our relationship with God, with our families, and what we can do to serve and help others. Our work and rest are necessary, but not to the exclusion of the things that matter most.

For example, the religious leaders of Jesus' day were so concerned about keeping the Sabbath rest, they forbade any form of

work, even forbidding helping and healing those who were suffering. Jesus spoke against this misunderstanding of godly rest on a number of occasions (Mark 3:1–6; Luke 13:10–17; John 9:14). The same could be said of our frequent elevation of the importance of work: work, like rest, is good and God-intended, but both must be kept in balance and never be allowed to continually hold us back from what matters most.

24. THE WORLD: ARE WE TO BE IN IT OR OF IT?

The New Testament makes it clear that Christians are not to be part of this present evil world, yet it also shows that they are to be involved in the world. How do we fulfill these equally important yet opposite seeming responsibilities? The answer lies in understanding each situation clearly and then living with proper balance.

Not of the World

In the climactic prayer Jesus offered on his last night with his disciples, he asked the Father to be with and to help them as well as those believers who would come after them:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world ... They are not of the world, even as I am not of it” (John 17:14, 16).

This is one of the few places where Jesus repeated a statement for emphasis – in this case, emphasizing that his followers were not of this world. In the epistle of James we read: “Don’t you realize that friendship with the world makes you an enemy of God? I say it again: If you want to be a friend of the world, you make yourself an enemy of God” (James 4:4 NLT). The apostle John explains why this must be:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.

The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

In the Greek of the New Testament the word *kosmos* translated “world” in these passages can mean the universe or the planet on which we live, but it usually means something else. Just as today in the United States we may use a geographic location to represent an aspect of society – such as “Hollywood” to mean the film entertainment industry, or “Wall Street” to mean the financial aspect of our nation – in the same way, John helps us to see that “the world” does not mean the physical earth, but the way of life of those who reject God’s word and its teachings.

As a result, to be “not of the world” does not mean that we retire into a monastic lifestyle without interaction with others, but that we do not participate in the world’s way of life, or its lack of morality, ethics, and values. That is why in the Scriptures we are regarded as citizens not of the world but of heaven (Philippians 3:20; Colossians 1:13; etc.).

In the World

On the other hand, despite the fact that Jesus said he was not of the world, he specifically came into the world to save it (John 3:17; 1 Timothy 1:15; etc.). Jesus also intended that his followers would do the same work in the world – which is why he prayed to the Father “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:16).

Jesus’ concern was certainly not that his followers escape from the world, but that they might be protected from evil while living and working in it. And he specifically encouraged his followers in this regard: “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). That is why Christians need not fear being in the world but can rejoice in the opportunity we have to help it. This is exactly what Jesus meant when he said: “You are the light of the world ... let your light shine before others,

that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:14, 16).

So, rather than withdrawing from others and living a secluded lifestyle, with God’s help we do not allow ourselves to be influenced by the ways of the world but actively involve ourselves in helping others and in the work of spreading the gospel. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, we should “learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow’s cause” (Isaiah 1:17 ESV). In the New Testament Paul expands on this same thought: “by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (Acts 20:35).

Of course, we also are given the responsibility of preaching the gospel to the world. Jesus’ command to “go and make disciples”(Matthew 28:19) is one that applies to all of us. If we wish to live in Christ, we must live as he did (1 John 2:6) – including interacting with those who do not know God and need to hear his truth (Mark 2:17). It is only to the degree that we are “in” the world that we can do these things.

Balancing “not of” with “in”

So the Bible is clear; we must be separate from – yet active in – the world at the same time. Although the exact phrase used by many Christians “in the world, but not of the world” is not found in the Bible, it nevertheless describes the balance we need to achieve. The apostle James summarizes this dual responsibility for us perfectly:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. (James 1:27)

We must, James reminds us, both be involved in helping others while at the same time not being negatively influenced by the world’s ways. We cannot do this by withdrawing and trying to have

limited or no contact with the world, of course, but by reaching out to the world in love while staying close to God so that with his help we continue to live in the light despite the surrounding darkness. This is what Paul meant when he wrote “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind” (Romans 12:2 ESV). We are not conformed to the world, but we do not turn our backs on its needs.

If it is our desire to please God, we must remain separate from the ungodliness of this present evil world; but to fully please God we must also be willing to live and work within the world that so desperately needs him.

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