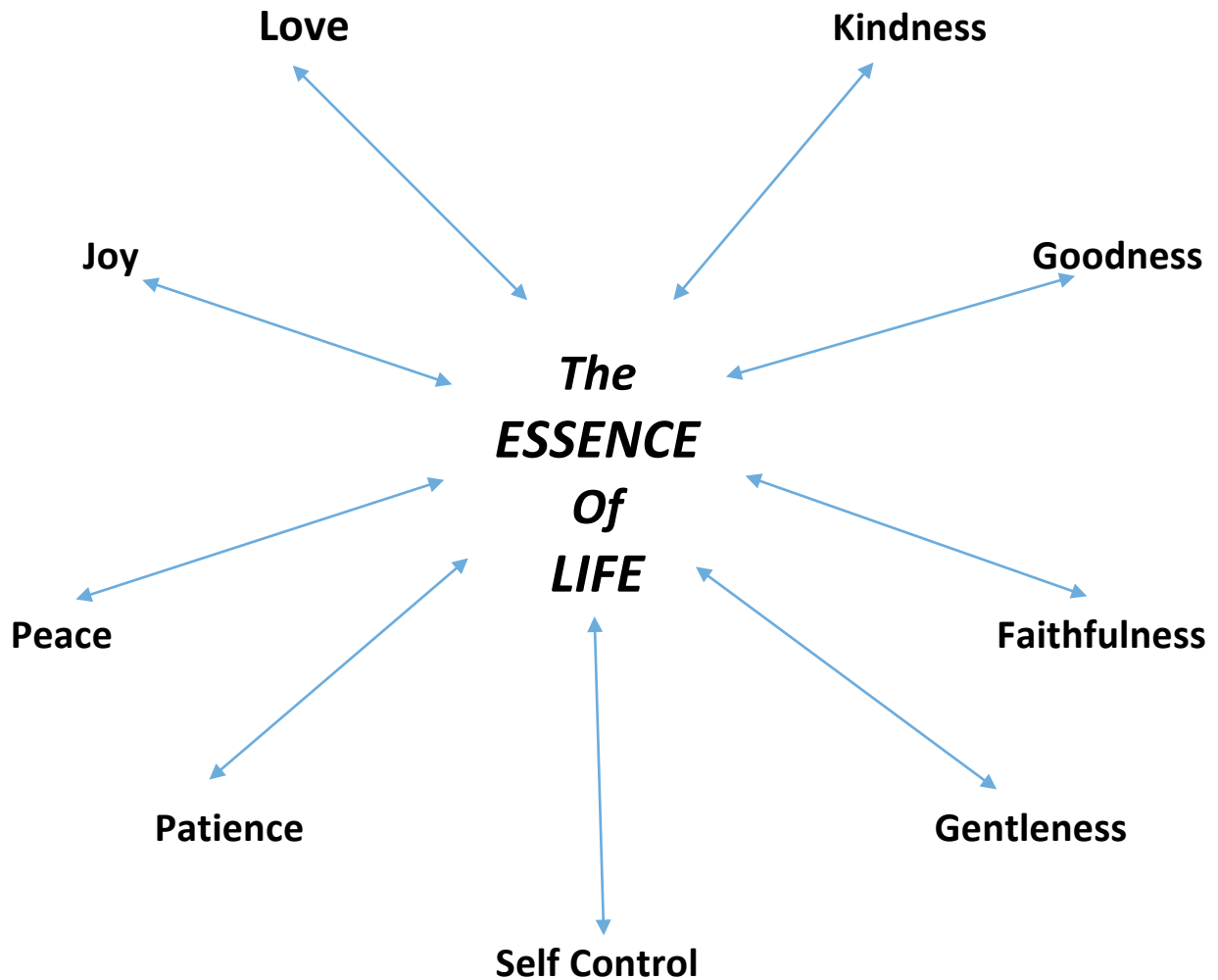


Based on
Galatians 5:22-23



A series of reflections on Paul's letter to the Galatians, Chapter 5:22-23,
written in the spring of 1992 by Reverend John Romeril, BA, MDiv,
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Table of Contents

Do You Love Me?	1
The Gift of Joy	6
Peace through Pain!	12
Patience- A Fruit of the Spirit	17
Kindness for the Undeserving	22
How to be Good the Easy Way	27
Faithfulness	33
The Gift of Gentleness	38
The Gift of Self-Control	44

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Text: And Jesus said a third time,

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

John 21:17

INTRODUCTION

Do you love me? If I address that question to my wife, my daughter or my son, there is no problem. To love and to be loved by one's family is the normal expectation. If I address the question to the whole congregation, while it might catch you by surprise, I am sure it wouldn't disturb you. If however I were to address the question to one or two individuals, who are not members of my family, then we could have a different situation.

If the question is asked on a one to one basis, there could be disturbing implications. For while we live in a time when the marital triangle has become almost commonplace, it is still disturbing and difficult to reconcile with our upbringing in the Christian faith. Yet the reality is that husbands do leave their wives, sometimes for another woman, but not always for that reason. Wives do leave their husbands, sometimes for another man, but not always for that reason. Marital infidelity is not confined to the pew.

What is the problem? Is it the result of poor moral training? Is it the result of more open and honest relationships? Is it the result of the Biblical call to love one another? Can a man love a woman without having an affair? Can a man love another man without being a homosexual? Is love sufficient grounds for having an affair? Should we change partners like we change the slip covers of an old chesterfield? As they become old and worn, we trade them in for something new, colourful and exciting? Or are we talking about different kinds of love?

a) LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Love appears in many forms. The Greeks distinguished four types of love and used a different word for each.

They spoke of *storge*... affectional love.

They spoke of *phileo*... brotherly love.

They spoke of *eros*... sexual love.

They spoke of *agape*... selfless or unconditional caring, the love of God.

And yet isn't every relationship somewhat of a mixture? Can we really keep them separate, in watertight compartments? In *Jesus Christ Super Star*, Mary Magdalene, whom tradition depicts as a prostitute, who as the song tells us, had loved many, many men, in a variety of ways, is troubled about her relationship with Jesus. She sings, "I don't know how to love him?"

What was she feeling? The love of affection? Sisterly love? Sexual attraction? Or unconditional caring? She senses that her relationship with Jesus ought to be different and yet, she says, "He's just a man, like any other man."

Her problem is our problem. Can a man have a woman friend other than his wife? Can they love one another? Can a woman have a male friend apart from her husband? Can they love one another? Can a man love a man, or a woman love another woman, without it being implied that there is an unnatural sexual relationship? What sort of relationship ought it to be? How much of one's life ought one to share? Is there such a thing as a truly platonic relationship? At what point do such friendships, such love for another person, become unfaithfulness to our marital partner? These are the questions in the real world. These are the questions the Church struggles with in the book, *Gift, Dilemma Promise*. As we live in a world of changing values, changing standards, where do we stand as Christians?

For centuries the Scriptures have been considered by Christians to be sufficient guide for morals and personal conduct. The Ten Commandments, acknowledged by the majority as the foundation of law in the Church, state very clearly that adultery is forbidden. In Mark's Gospel Jesus is reported to have said,

"In the beginning, at the creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be made one with his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. It follows that they are no longer two individuals, they are one flesh."

For Jesus the norm seems to be one man plus one woman for life. He has nothing to say about premarital relationships. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, "Make no mistake; no fornicator or idolater, none who is guilty either of adultery or homosexual perversion, no thieves or grabbers, or drunkards or slanderers or swindlers will possess the kingdom of God."

The Bible seems to speak clearly in opposition to any sexual act either before marriage or outside the marital relationship. But it says nothing about loving relationships outside of marriage, about their depth or intimacy. Is the Biblical view still relevant? Does a changing society with changing views indicate a change in God's expectations of his people in the area of human relationships? Does the ethic of love mean that all things are permitted in the name of love?

b) IS THERE A CHRISTIAN POSITION TODAY?

But is our world really that different from the world of the New Testament?

Peter Berger, in his book, *Transcending Modernity*, has a chapter he calls, "Cake for the Queen of Heaven". In it he reviews the ancient cults of sacred sexuality – Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Ashtarat in Syria and Palestine, Ashtartes in Egypt, and Aphrodite among the Greeks. He writes,

“The human being’s fundamental religious quest is to establish contact with divine forces and beings that transcend him. The cult of sacred sexuality provided this contact in a way that was easy and pleasurable.... To establish contact with them, when all was said mythologically, and all was done ritually, one only had to do what, after all, one wanted to do anyway.”

Peter Berger describes this as an early form of cheap grace. The religion of Israel, on the other hand, linked cultic obligations with moral imperatives having to do with social justice, and right relations between nations and classes, with the protection of the weak. He writes, “Astartes’ grace was cheap and comfortable. Yahweh’s grace had to be bought with moral effort and discipline.” He suggests that today we are seeing a resurgence of sacred sexuality. Astartes is alive and well. He sees her presence in “the get in touch with your body” movement, and in the growing belief that sexuality is the key, perhaps even THE key component of the quality of being human. While not condemning this completely he concludes by saying,

“But for ethical reasons also I cannot leave it with an attitude of total tolerance. There is still a vital connection between what we worship and what our morality is. Now, as then, the world is full of injustice and misery. The God of the Covenant demands of us that we work in this world, that we strive to combat injustice and to alleviate misery.”

A religion of pleasure, no matter what the intentions of its advocates, can only inhibit the efforts that are required by the moral demand. And, if I am to be honest, at this point in my reflections, my tolerance wears very thin indeed. In a world of mass murder, and mass starvation, of unprecedented terror, odious tyrannies and the threat of nuclear holocausts, there is something obscene about an order of priorities that starts off with bigger and better orgasms. If, after almost 2,000 years, people still yearn for gods of pleasure, ought the gospel’s demands to be modified? After all, isn’t love all that really matters?

While it is true that Jesus stressed the centrality of love, love for God being number one, then love for neighbour, he also said, “But if a man is a cause of stumbling to one of these little ones who have faith in me, it would be better for him to have a millstone hung around his neck and be dropped into the depths of the sea.”

We do have a responsibility for each other:

- To be the cause of another’s breaking a trust,
- To be the cause of another’s unfaithfulness,
- To be the cause of a broken relationship,
- To be the cause of another’s missing the mark of their high calling,

is surely a serious offence before God. True, it is not unforgiveable, but we should never presume on God’s forgiveness. It is possible to admire something without having to possess it. It is possible to love someone without breaking previous commitments, or being unfaithful. Every appetite does not have to be satisfied. Every door does not have to be opened. We don’t have to follow every path.

Christian love, our love for one another, may be a mixture of affection, brotherly or sisterly love, even sometimes sexual attraction, but it ought to be predominantly *agape* love, the unconditional caring for each other which is made possible through our relationship to God in Christ.

c) FEED MY SHEEP

“Do you love me?” Jesus asked Peter. Do you love this Jesus? Do we love this God who has been made visible in Jesus of Nazareth? How can we love someone we can neither see nor touch? The answer to the questions is the answer Jesus gave Peter, “Feed my sheep.”

If we love the God who has been made visible in Jesus, then we are to feed God’s sheep. Jesus’ use of the word ‘sheep’ was not intended to imply what we usually mean when we call people sheep. Christ’s sheep are neither silly, passively helpless nor easily led astray. They are the people who have needs, people who are hungry, thirsty, people who have lost their way. People who are confused by doubts and uncertainties. They are to be nurtured, enabled to stand on their feet. Affirmed in such a way that they may grow to maturity, the kind of maturity we see in Jesus our Christ.

Sidney Jourard writes, “You cannot love another person, that is, behave towards him so as to foster his happiness and growth, unless you know his needs. And you cannot know his needs unless he tells you.” Each of us is at a different age and a different stage in the Christian Life. What may be nourishing food for one may be quite indigestible for another. One who is young in their faith may not be able to stand the pressures that a weather-beaten saint can stand. One has to crawl before one learns to walk, and one who is learning to walk should not be forced to run before they are ready. But all need to be encouraged, nurtured, enabled to grow in their faith and in their service of Almighty God. Our love for one another is demonstrated as we seek to know one another, accept one another, and care for one another.

The task given by Jesus to Peter is the task that is given to all who love the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the task of every Christian community. It is the task of every follower of Christ. We are to provide wholesome nourishment through the life and work of our congregation. That is, sound teaching in our Sunday School and mid-week groups, opportunities to study our faith and discover how our faith relates to the issues of the day.

Our community of faith ought to be one in which all of God’s children find acceptance. That is to say, while there may be differences of opinion, different interpretations of Biblical passages, even differing understandings of how our faith relates to life, nevertheless we recognize that we are all one in Christ.

While we may be at different stages in our journey, we are all committed to the journey of becoming the person God in Christ wants us to be. Being a Christian, the call to set an example of Christian living in the home and the community does not mean that we are free to do

whatever we like. We are free to be Christ's person. Reuel Howe says of such a person, "His love in the final analysis is his willingness to be responsible for others, for himself, for the world in which he lives even if such responsibility is onerous and makes upon him what others call inordinate demands."

CONCLUSION

How shall we love one another? How shall we handle our human sexuality? To some the Biblical approach may seem harsh. It is not popular today because it condemns much of what our society would like blessed. As I struggle with the question, "Have God's demands changed?" I have come to the conclusion that for me the key to Christian relationships is the acceptance of our acceptance by God in Christ.

To know that we are loved, to know that we are accepted just as we are by the One who made us, and who has loved us from the moment of our conception, frees us to be the caring person God in Christ calls us to be.

When God is first in our life, all other relationships fall into their proper place. As we love one another, as we come to know one another, as we seek to share one another's burdens, there will be temptations, our thoughts and our feelings may not always be what they ought to be. But as long as God is at the centre, as long as we seek to serve God, we can love one another because God loves us. We can love one another in the same way our God loves us, with unconditional caring for the total well-being of the other.

THE GIFT OF JOY

Text: *I have spoken thus to you that my joy may be in you,
and your joy may be complete."*

John 5:11

INTRODUCTION

Whenever I hear these words of Jesus I am reminded of a chorus which was popular many years ago and which is experiencing a comeback in the renewed interest in the use of choruses in worship. I am sure it's familiar to many of you. It goes –

"I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in my heart, Down in my heart, Down in my heart
I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy
Down in my heart, Down in my heart to stay."

It speaks to us of a deep-down contentment which is intended to fill us with exuberance for the whole of life despite the day-to-day mood swings we all experience in life.

This morning the children are going to experience, to some extent, the exuberance of Mardi Gras; the type of exuberance we have all caught a glimpse of on the TV news when the New Orleans Mardi Gras is reported on. But the type of exuberance that does not last, even if we think such joyous abandonment is a good thing. The reality is that sooner or later even the most exuberant become a little frozen around the edges, somewhat like the streams and creeks that criss-cross the countryside after the first really hard frost. The stream, a symbol for the life within, starts to freeze from its edges and, if its environment continues to cool, it will freeze right over and the ice gets deeper and thicker until only a trickle of water is running. Life appears to have come to a standstill.

But when the sun begins to warm the air, the ice begins to melt and, so long as the environment remains warm, it is not long before one can once again hear the joyous sound of water bubbling along, cascading over rocks of varying shapes and sizes, water in a hurry. But going to where? To do what?

The streams that criss-cross our countryside exist for one purpose. As they flow they give of themselves until eventually they lose themselves completely in the ocean. Throughout its journey a stream gives of itself freely asking nothing in return. The wild creatures along its banks quench their thirst. Wild flowers bulrushes, trees, all derive their sustenance from it. It will fill reservoirs, maintaining the water supplies of great cities. It will turn generators of great power plants. Over the length of its journey a stream will give of itself in countless ways.

But from time to time it loses its sparkle, it loses its joyous sound. From white water rapids it can become a slow-moving stream through a swamp. In the dead of winter it seems to sleep. Yet despite all appearances it continues to do the job for which it was created.

Life, your life and mine, is like that stream. Sometimes the sparkle goes out. The light dies in the eye, the spring goes out of our step, the voice loses its note of joy, and we have the blahs.

a) THE BLAHS

We all have those days, some of us more than others, when we feel down, lethargic, uninterested in everything and everyone, and not because of the flu. It is not really surprising when you consider the steady diet we get of bad news – earthquakes, tornados, floods, drought, starvation, civil war, armed robbery, the physical and sexual abuse of women and children, the senseless killing of innocent people by deranged gunmen. Faced with this steady diet of bad news it is little wonder many people find faith in a God of love difficult to hold on to, and the joy of living elusive. When those in the depths of despair turn towards the Church, they do not always find people who have discovered that deep-down sense of joy, that deep-down sense of contentment with life that enables them to sail through stormy waters without fear.

Outwardly things have changed. We no longer dress in dark somber colours. The long face is no longer essential. Dancing, the theatre, card playing, movies are no longer seen to be the works of the devil. Sunday has become like any other day of the week. But for all the changes are we a more joyous people? Do we enjoy the life and work of the church more than our parents did who held to a stricter way of life? Have the changes enabled the Christian community to fulfil the mission entrusted to it by Christ (to make disciples of all nations)? Are we a brighter light in the community and world as a result of these changes?

In baptizing a lot of the old “Thou shalt nots”, we may have banished the blahs for some, but as the saints of old were very clear, this is not the way to experience abiding joy. Some of the baptized “Thou shalt nots” had to do with personal pleasure and, as the first letter of Timothy reminds us, “God endows us richly with all things to enjoy.” Life is to be enjoyed.

But life was never intended for the pursuit of pleasure alone. God’s purpose in creating men and women was not to introduce a race of hedonists. Nor was life intended for the accumulation of personal possessions. Today both of these pursuits are seen by many as the cure for the blahs. The problem with this view is that both the desire for pleasure and the desire for things can never be satisfied. The result, according to the World Conference on the Environment, being the destruction of our environment because of over-consumption, and the real possibility of this planet becoming uninhabitable.

The human problem is that the more we have, the more we want. In the boating world it is called two-foot-itis. In suburbia it used to be called “keeping up with the Jones’s”. We are led to believe that the more we have, the happier we will be. The bigger the boat, the bigger the car,

winning the lottery – these we are told are the key to being blissfully happy for the rest of our lives.

When we seek happiness via personal pleasure, or the acquisition of things, we become more anxious rather than less anxious. We must have alarm systems, guard dogs, gated communities, more police to protect what we have from the hordes out there who, we believe, are trying to take it away from us. Real happiness eludes us.

At the root of a cure for the blahs is an attitude towards life, which reminds me of a delightful story about a little old lady who, at the age of 103, went to the doctor for her annual check-up. He found her in good health. As she was leaving she said, “See you next year, Doc,” at which the Doctor retorted, “What makes you so confident about that?” She replied, “How many 103-year-olds do you see dying?” After her 104th birthday she reported for her annual check-up. Her regular doctor was away on vacation so a younger doctor conducted her physical. When he had finished he reported to her, “I find you in excellent health, but your pulse is just a little high.” To which the old lady replied, “What do you expect with a young man holding my hand?”

Most of us tend to react like a barometer. Our feelings, our attitude to life, change with the weather; change with the circumstances of the moment; change with the feelings of those around us. This sign that used to be outside St Jude’s church in Whitechapel in the east side of London, is worth thinking about:

“Your lives are busy and useful, but your faces are anxious and you are not all that you want to be. There is within you another life which does not get free. Men carry about a buried life. I believe that in a quiet place we may wait God’s call. St Jude’s church will be open on Sunday evenings. Will you come in for even ten minutes? It may be that as you listen to the silences, or the music, God will speak, that buried life will arise and you will have peace.”

If we are still and allow God the opportunity, he can thaw our frozen stream, and bring to birth that deep-down inner contentment, the peace that passeth all understanding, the gift of joy which, according to Paul in his letter to the Galatians, is a gift of the Spirit.

b) THE JOY OF OUR LORD

Jesus was one who was filled with the Spirit and therefore possessed this gift of joy. The New Testament writers depict him as one who had an attitude towards life that could only be described as joyous. He possessed a deep and abiding joy. Matthew tells us that when Jesus met a man with the palsy, he said, “Son, be of good cheer.” In John’s Gospel, we read, “Jesus said, In the world you will have trouble. Be of good cheer. I have overcome the world.”

Jesus told the parables of the Lost Coin, the Lost Sheep, and the Lost Son. His emphasis in each story was not on the loss but on the joy when the lost was found. He told of a treasure hid

in a field and stressed the joy of the discovery. Jesus taught that life in the Kingdom was like the spirit of Joy which comes to us when the lost is found.

Henry Fosdick, in his little book, *The Manhood of the Master*, says, "The New Testament is the most joyful book in the world. It opens with joy over the birth of Jesus; and it ends with a superb picture of a multitude, which no man can number, singing Hallelujah choruses. No matter where you open it, amid fortunate or discouraging circumstances, you will always have this note of joy."

What was Jesus' secret? Could it have something to do with his conviction that, "My meat is to do the will of Him who sent me." In other words, his joy was founded on the conviction that one finds one's life by losing it. His joy, his deep-down peace and contentment was founded on his relationship to God as his father, and that all people were God's children. This relationship to God gave him the assurance that, despite all appearances, the world was being guided to its divine destiny.

He points to this hope in many of his parables. Even if three-quarters of the sower's seed falls on unproductive ground, that which falls on good soil will be productive. Even though the kingdom's beginning is as small as a grain of mustard seed, it will eventually encompass all the nations of the world. Even though the life of the kingdom is surrounded by weeds, the weeds will never overpower it.

Because Jesus' life was founded on his relationship to God and his willingness to do God's will, therefore he possessed the certainty that in the end the will of God will triumph, and no change in outward circumstances had the power to affect him. Neither could the attitude of the men and women of his day take from him his sense of deep-down confidence, his joy. Samuel Gordon may be close to the truth when he writes:

"Joy is distinctly a Christian word, and a Christian thing. It is the reverse of happiness. Happiness is the result of what happens of an agreeable sort. Joy has its springs deep down inside and that spring never runs dry, no matter what happens. Only Jesus gives that joy. He had joy singing its music within, even under the shadow of the cross. It is an unknown word and thing, except as He has His way with us."

Dr Rachel Remen, in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom* writes:

"I had thought joy to be rather synonymous with happiness but it seems now to be far less vulnerable than happiness. Joy seems to be part of an unconditional wish to live, to hold nothing back because life may not meet our preferences and expectations. Joy seems to be a function of the willingness to accept the whole, and to show up to meet with whatever is there. It has a kind of invincibility that attachment to any particular outcome would deny us. Rather than the warrior who fights towards a specific outcome and therefore is haunted by the spectre of failure and disappointment, it is the lover drunk with the opportunity to love despite the possibility of loss, the player for whom playing has become more important than winning or losing.

“The willingness to win or lose moves us out of an adversarial relationship to lie and into a powerful openness. From such a position we can make a greater commitment to life. Not only pleasant life, comfortable life, or our idea of life, but all of life. Joy seems more closely related to aliveness than to happiness”

c) HOW?

Is it possible for us to experience this joy of Jesus?

Jesus said, “I have spoken to you, so that my joy may be in you, and your joy complete.” What had he said? In the preceding verses Jesus had spoken of himself as the vine and his disciples as the branches. He stressed the need for the branches to be joined to the vine if they were to bear fruit. Unfruitful branches are cut off and destroyed. He believed that it was God’s will that all the branches should bear fruit and thus be his disciples. Therefore the joy of the Master can be experienced by the disciple only as the disciple is united with Christ, that is, dwells in the love of Christ, seeking to fulfil the commandments of Christ, and is a living member of the body of Christ. C.S. Lewis, in his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, puts it this way:

“Total surrender, the absolute leap in the dark, was demanded. The reality with which no treaty can be made was upon me. The demand was not even ‘all or nothing’. I think that stage had been passed on the bus stop when I had unbuckled my armour and the snowman started to melt. Now the demand was ‘ALL’.”

While D.M. Aycock says, “Joy is simply the outcome of having roots in the right place.”

Paul, in and through his Damascus Road experience and through his life of service, also discovered this inner joy so that when imprisoned, faced with execution, he could write, “Rejoice always, again I say rejoice.” This discovery of deep-down contentment, the gift of joy, has been true for many Christians down through the centuries. But it is a very delicate thing until it is firmly rooted in Christ. In the early stages it can so easily be capped. In the face of suffering, tragedy, personal pain, we can become filled with self-pity, we may moan and groan about the way life has played us false. D.M. Baillie says this is an,

“emotional luxury and may well be an escape from costly burden bearing. It is only God who can carry the burdens of the whole world and when we tragically profess to be doing it, we are not really bearing anybody’s burden, but just adding to the depression. But God’s servants are not like that. They are glad, with a stream of peace and serenity which runs underneath all the sorrow. These are the real helpers of mankind: sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, yet possessing all things.”

The psalmist sums up our situation. We need to believe that God is the one who “sustains those who are wavering in weakness and grants them His grace and strength. He reaches into the void of empty lives and enriches and fulfils their hungry hearts. He is near enough to hear

our every cry, to sense our every need, to grant us whatever is necessary to make us happy and productive as we seek to follow and to serve him.”

CONCLUSION

Some Christians in a village in India came to Stephen Neil saying, “Our well is already dry and there is no hope of rain for four months. What shall we do?” He said to them, “I think there is water deeper down. Try boring a shaft in the middle of your well.”

For six days they worked and nothing came. On the seventh day they came to him, radiant with joy, and said, “There is water in the well to the height of two men.” They had managed to pierce the hard rock and, forty feet down, they had found the hidden stream. The water had been there all the time. When they went deep enough, they found it.

Have we discovered that stream of living water? Are we experiencing that deep-down contentment, that peace that passeth all understanding, that comes when we are united to the true vine, so that the joy of our Master may flow in and through us enabling us to meet all the experiences of life with the confidence that there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord?

PEACE THROUGH PAIN!

Text: *I have told you this so that in me you may find peace.
In the world you will have trouble. But courage!
The victory is mine; I have conquered the world.”* John 16:33

INTRODUCTION

How we all long for peace. Peace among the nations, the end of all wars. Peace between races, the end of all racial prejudice. Peace within our families, the end of teen rebelliousness. Peace within the church, no more discussion of controversial issues. Peace within myself, the end of the struggle between what I know I ought to do, and what I want to do.

We have tried to achieve peace among the nations, first through the League of Nations and now the United Nations. But wars have not ceased. We have tried to achieve peace between racial groups through education and getting to know those who are racially different from us. But racial tension is increasing. Parent training under various names has been with us for some time, but teenage rebellion must be lived with, some might say endured. Putting controversial issues into the closet does not resolve them. It simply puts off the day of reckoning. So long as what I want to do and what I know I ought to do are different, I will suffer from that internal struggle. Papering over the cracks gives only temporary relief, not a lasting peace. In the light of our reality we need to ask, “Is our understanding of peace correct?”

a) THE BIBLICAL VIEW OF PEACE

The Bible speaks a great deal about Peace. The prophet Isaiah said, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on thee.” (Isaiah 26:3), while Paul, writing to the Philippians, says, “The peace of God, which is beyond our understanding, will keep guard over your heart and your thought in Christ Jesus.” Jesus, himself, said, “These things I have spoken to you that in me you might find peace.” (John 16:33).

From the context of these passages it is clear that none of them are using the term peace in the way it is popularly used today. Isaiah was speaking to a nation facing defeat and exile. Paul was writing at the height of a serious controversy in the Church at Philippi and he himself was in prison facing the possibility of execution. Jesus spoke of peace in the context of his own approaching crucifixion and death, and the grief his disciples would experience at that time.

Biblically speaking, peace seems to be something one can experience in the midst of conflict, in the midst of pain and suffering. It is not necessarily the absence of conflict, pain or suffering. Some of you may remember the movie *Poseidon*. It was the story of a cruise ship that was hit by a tidal wave, turned over, and for a while floated upside down. Among the passengers were two clergy. One wore his clerical collar, the other didn't, having grown dissatisfied with the

Church as an institution. The one who always wore his clerical collar decided to stay to comfort the frightened passengers as they waited to die. The other organized those who wished to find a way out and led them on their search which was finally successful. Which of the two was expressing the peace of God? Is the peace of God the absence of all striving, the absence of all struggle, the acceptance of what appears to be the inevitable?

Two artists were asked to create paintings that would depict peace. One painted a beautiful mirror-like lake that reflected the blue sky, bright sun and leafy trees. There was perfect calm. Not a ripple disturbed the surface of the lake. The second painted a thundering waterfall, with foaming whirlpools and treacherous rocks at its base. Extending over the brink of the cataract was the limb of a tree. In its fork was a nest where a mother bird was feeding her young. Which picture is a true portrayal of the peace of God? These two points of view have been expressed by the poets. John Whittier wrote:

“Drop thy still dews of quietness till all our striving cease;
Take from our soul the strain and stress
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.”

While Studdard Kennedy expresses a different view when he writes,

“Peace does not mean the end of striving
Joy does not mean the drying of our tears
Peace is the power that comes to souls arriving
Up to the light where God Himself appears.”

David Reed, when minister of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City, said:

“... If we think that the peace of which the Bible speaks is a soothing syrup of the soul to be taken once a week as directed, we are most seriously mistaken. If we think it is the kind of peace that is offered by the world, the peace that soothes us through forgetfulness, the peace of temporary euphoria, the peace of a second martini, then we have not heard Christ speak, ‘Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.’ The Biblical word is Shalom. It literally means fullness, perfection. It is that state of life in which God’s will is being done. There can be no peace of God unless the will of God is being done. God calls us to live in right relationships, in righteousness. God calls us to replace injustice with justice, to overcome evil with good. Living within the will of God, seeking to carry out the will of God, usually involves struggle, and is painful.”

b) THE PEACE OF CHRIST

Shalom, the peace of God which is beyond human understanding, can be seen in Jesus our Christ.

John tells the story of Jesus coming before Pilate, the Roman governor. Pilate is deeply troubled by this encounter. Yet he was the ruler. He held the political power. He was judge, jury, and had the power of life and death. He was free to leave the courtroom, enjoy a good dinner and sleep soundly. Or was he? The prisoner before him was in pain. His back had been beaten raw. On his head was a crown of thorns, the thorns pressing into his scalp, the blood pouring down his face. He stands before Pilate, alone, not a friend in sight. Soon he will be nailed to a cross, to suffer the most painful death known to man. Soon he would cry, "My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me?"

Despite his pain, he forgives those who crucify him. He remembers the care of his mother. He places his spirit in the hands of God. He was a man at peace. To Pilate he says, "You could have no power over me unless it was given to you from above."

Carl Simcox writes:

"It is a most important truth about the passion of Christ. The power that crucified Christ was from God the father, not the devil. And as Christ faced the cross he recalls this and the peace of God holds him in his might embrace. The power of God misused by men, will crucify him; but the love of God will have the last word, and it has the power to turn the worst that men can do into victory over death and hell. Christ's mind is kept in perfect peace because he knows God."

So much of the pain and suffering in the world today is caused by the misuse of the power and the gifts God has entrusted to us. There is also much pain and suffering in the world today which is the result of God's children seeking to banish injustice and establish right relationships, bringing reconciliation to a broken world.

Jesus experienced the peace of Shalom because he and God were at one. Physically he suffered pain and heartache but he was at peace. This is the peace that he offers us today. It is one of the gifts of the Spirit as we allow the Spirit of God to mould and direct our lives. In Jesus we see the Spirit in complete command. It was his meat, his daily food, to do God's will.

But doing the will of God is no easy task. Even for Jesus it was a continual struggle. At times it brought him into conflict with his family. In some situations it meant he was in conflict with the religious establishment. His insistence on the supremacy of God above all human authorities brought him into conflict with the political powers. It can involve going the second mile, turning the other cheek, cleansing the Temple, seeking always what is best for others, as God understands what is best for them. The peace Jesus experienced did not come from travelling the easy road, but came despite his suffering and pain.

c) HOW DO WE FIND THIS PEACE?

Is there no easier way? Jesus said, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father but by me." His life and teaching lead us to the peace of God. Charles Everst wrote:

“Take up your cross, the Saviour said, if you would my disciple be,
Deny yourself, the world forsake and humbly follow after me.”

But surely, don't the Scriptures imply that God has already made His peace with us? That is why Christ came. Through his life and death Christ proclaimed our reconciliation with God. For Paul says, “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”

We know that entailed suffering for him. He endured the cross, the suffering and the shame and pain for us. Why then do we need to suffer? This peace of God, which is a gift of the Spirit, should be ours to experience now. And it is, provided we allow the Spirit to live in us, bringing us into a right relationship with God. That means living with God in this world. That's where the pain often comes in. Letting go our security blankets and depending upon God alone, does not come easily. Letting go our prejudices, letting go our frustrations, letting go our hurts, letting go our anger, forgiving others, acknowledging our need for forgiveness, being reconciled to our enemies, are all painful activities. To be willing to accept all people as God's children, our brothers and sisters, members of the same human family, and living out the implications of that reality is far from easy. It too can involve pain and suffering. If we could experience the peace of God, then the will of God must be done in all areas of our lives.

We know that it is God's will that all children should be cared for unconditionally, that the disciples of Christ were called to be ambassadors of reconciliation, to be the hands and feet of Christ in society. But what does that mean for us individually? What will it mean for me to do God's will day by day? What will it mean for my family? What will it mean to live God's will in my job, in my community, in my home, in this church? What will it mean to establish right relationships with everyone, even those who see things differently from the way I do? Can right relationships be built on half-truths? Can we cast the mote out of our brother's eye if we have a log in our own eye?

The peace of God does not come when we paper over the cracks. Peace often comes only through pain. The pain of probing for the source of a conflict. The pain of discovering and acknowledging our share in a broken relationship. The pain of risking the loss of a friendship. The pain of struggling with the need for repentance and forgiveness.

But in our world today there is also the pain of our brothers and sisters who struggle against hunger and disease, natural disasters and man-made disasters, those caught in the crossfire of civil war, those who form the bread lines and those who sleep on the streets and in the ghettos.

How do we deal with the pain of the world? Do we simply tune out, turn to another channel, so that our inner personal peace will not be disturbed? Has this human suffering become so commonplace that we no longer give it a second thought? Can peace be experienced, that is God's peace, in the midst of such suffering? The Rev J.R. Stott of All souls Church in London, England makes some worthwhile suggestions. He writes:

“It will include spending time in responsible thought and prayer, seeking to face and understand the situation; wrestling with the question of what our Christian duty is; praying with genuine compassion for the victims of disaster that the conscience of the world may be aroused and bring adequate relief; giving conscientiously and generously to a relief organisation; repenting of that sin in ourselves which in others has been the cause of suffering; to resolve by the grace of God that we will never be guilty of any similar oppression or cruelty. The same principles apply when we are disturbed by sin, doubt, fear, tension, or bereavement. We need first to identify what has upset us. Then bring it into the open before God and seek to relate it to what we know of God. Then we must stay our minds on God, until we begin to see our problem from God’s perspective. Then we must work out our vision of God in practical terms of repentance, faith, resolve or social action. We must allow the Holy Spirit to probe the causes of the conflict and then seek His courage to put right whatever has gone wrong, it is this that will bring pain – the pain of repentance and confession to God; or an apology or some restitution to a man or facing our neighbour with his fault, or grappling with a problem of human suffering.”

CONCLUSION

There are then things we can do. In the face of our personal needs and the world’s needs we may feel we can never do enough. The Biblical writers had a vision of a world in which all God’s children would one day live in harmony. A day of justice for all. A day when the lion would lie down with the lamb. A vision of Utopia.

For Jesus it is the Kingdom of God, the rule of God which he was introducing. A kingdom which was visible when and wherever men and women did the will of God. Similarly, Shalom, the peace of God, the gift of the Spirit, may be experienced now by individuals as we seek moment by moment to do God’s will, but in its larger sense is still a future possibility.

Jesus called his first disciples, and continues to call men and women into discipleship so that there will always be that visible presence of a people seeking God’s will, striving under the guidance of the Spirit to do God’s will.

As we struggle to be the persons God is calling us to be, as we seek to love our neighbour as our self, as we seek justice and right relationships, we are doing God’s will and can experience Shalom, the gift of the Spirit, in the midst of a world that is far from perfect, and in the midst of daily experiences which can be frustrating, and even painful. We live this life in the sure and certain hope that God’s kingdom will come, God’s will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is not an easy road that Christ calls us to walk but it is the road he walked. Can disciples of Christ walk any other, if they would walk with him?

PATIENCE – A FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Text: *“Then put on the garments that suit God’s chosen people,
his own, his beloved: compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience.”*
Col 3:12

INTRODUCTION

The need for patience has been much on my mind this last month. If any of you have ever been on a European tour you will know what I mean.

This was a Jubilee year in Rome. The crowds were enormous. The line-ups were longer than ever. Fortunately, in a number of cases, tour groups had special line-ups which were not quite as long as those for the general public. Nevertheless patience was an important ingredient on most days. Occasionally someone would try to crash the line, but for the most part people were very patient. Which is rather surprising when you think what happens when your plane touches down and the stewardess reminds everybody to remain seated until the plane reaches the terminal. At which point most passengers are like the horses at a starting gate, rushing to get their hand luggage down, anxious to be off as quickly as possible despite the fact there will be long lines at immigration and at the baggage claim.

So as I waited in line the words of a verse I learned as a child kept running through my head,

“Patience is a virtue
Virtue is a grace
Grace was a little girl who wouldn’t wash her face.”

Thus I was reminded that patience is a virtue, a grace, a gift of God, one of the fruits of the spirit. Nevertheless it is hard to be patient. As a parent we teach our children to read and to count before they start kindergarten. Musical instruments are sold with instruction books that promise to have you playing a recognizable tune in minutes. Many parents try to push their children ahead of their natural development. The demand today is for instant foods of all varieties. On the highway, to travel at the speed limit is to hold up traffic, or so it seems. Life is lived in one big rush. Our holiday is over and we are planning the next one. Young people starting out in life want to begin at the place their parents are, forgetting that it has taken them thirty or forty years of hard work to get where they are.

As we rush hither and thither through life we forget to enjoy the present moment. In so many areas of the world the demand is for change, not next month or next year, but right this instant.

Patience is not a common virtue. In Scripture our word patience has two basic meanings. It can mean to stand firm in the faith in the face of difficulty and suffering, without losing heart or hope. This was the patience of Job. The second meaning has to do with time. It is the ability to wait until the appointed time without becoming frustrated or angry. It is the patience of the athlete who practices his or her skill religiously in preparation for the big event. It is the patience of the farmer who, having planted the seed, must wait until harvest time. It does not help to keep uncovering the seeds to see how they are doing.

If patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit, it must also be an aspect of the life and character of God.

a) THE PATIENCE OF GOD

The Scriptures, our basic source, paint an unfolding picture of the patience of God. While Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden because of one act of disobedience, and the story of the flood tells of the destruction of life apart from Noah's family and the animals he sheltered in the ark, the rainbow is given as the sign that God will never do this again. That is to say, God is going to be more patient with His children.

The patience of God is seen throughout the history of Israel. Time and time again we are told that they turned away from God, worshipping other gods, but they discovered that their God was "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (Psalm 103:8). Some may feel that this patience of God is inappropriate, for it seems to deny God's power and allows evil and disobedience to flourish. Yet our growing knowledge of this universe would point to a very patient creator God.

The world we enjoy today is the result of millions and millions of years of development. Our human history is just a small fraction of the whole story. The story is not complete. The universe, the human story, both continue to unfold according to the Divine plan. What patience! It is somewhat like our planting of an acorn. We know that in time it will grow into a mighty oak tree. Sometime in the future it will become big enough to furnish timber for beautiful furniture. But we will not live to see it, nor will our children or grandchildren. But some future generation will.

To be able to live our life on behalf of future generations is to share something of the patience of God. For God does not attempt to fulfil His purpose in one generation or ten generations. God's purpose was not fulfilled when he called Abraham, or Isaac, or Moses, or Saul, or David, or any of the prophets. Each had a part to play in a great Drama that continues to be played out on the stage of human history. Two thousand years passed between the birth of Abraham and the birth of Jesus. Two thousand years of preparation. In the passing of those centuries there were long periods when nothing of consequence seemed to be happening. At times the voice of God was silent. "But when the time was fully come God sent forth His son," (Gal. 4:4). And the drama has continued to unfold. The Christian Faith, the Christian Story, has

ebbed and flowed like the sea. From moments of great hope that God's Kingdom would come, to moments of black despair. But God is still at work. Is there no end to the patience of God?

Jesus spoke of a harvest time. A time when the weeds and the grain would be harvested together, and the weeds destroyed. He spoke of a time when the sheep would be separated from the goats on the basis of what each had done or not done for one of the least of these his brethren. For Jesus, there was an end to God's patience. He calls us to use the time we have wisely. We are intended to grow in our Christian faith and life. We are intended to find our place in God's plan. We are intended to discover God's will for our lives and to do it. But our time is limited. We have but one life to live, "But once we pass this way".

b) PATIENCE IN THE LIFE OF JESUS

If God was in Christ then we should be able to see this same quality of patience in the life of Jesus. As we look at Jesus we see a man with potential for greatness, yet who chose to live in relative obscurity as a carpenter in a Galilean village. His years in Nazareth, growing up in the home of Joseph and Mary and then, on the death of Joseph, assuming the role of the bread winner for the family, were his years of preparation.

For thirty years he waited. As he saw the need, how his patience must have been tried. But when the moment came, he confined his activities to Galilee and Judea, two obscure provinces of the Roman Empire. He travelled on foot, often delayed by the crowds, but he never became impatient with them. He always had time to stop and deal with an individual.

One day he was asked to go to the bedside of a girl who was dying. On the way someone touched the hem of his robe. Immediately he stopped and would not resume his journey until she had revealed herself. Having met her personal need, and only then, did he continue on his journey. On his way to Jerusalem he took time to eat with the tax collector, Zacchaeus. One day the mother of James and John came to him asking him for the chief seats in the kingdom for her sons. How that must have hurt. But he was not impatient with her.

Time and again his disciples misunderstood his teaching, or they missed the point of a parable, and he would turn aside taking the time out explain it to them. There were times when his disciples acted foolishly. There were times when they showed their lack of faith. There were times when they let him down. But he never became impatient. He stood by them. Even Judas was not discarded, even though Jesus knew he would betray him.

The life of Jesus is such a contrast to many of our lives.

c) OUR NEED

If patience is one of the fruits of the Spirit, why are we so often impatient? Patience is the result of the Spirit's presence in our lives. But like the other gifts of the Spirit, it grows gradually as we are open to the direction of the Spirit. We believe that the Spirit is at work in our lives from our birth. Baptism is intended to be a sign of that openness. At our confirmation we are

saying that we have agreed with our parents, and wish our lives to be open to the direction of the Spirit. As we make our public Declaration of Faith and commit ourselves to discipleship, we are choosing for ourselves to live the life God in Christ is calling us to live. We have decided to, “Run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:1). But as we say, Rome wasn’t built in a day. Nor does mature Christian living come overnight. The gifts of the Spirit grow slowly in our lives. It can be discouraging. Some children are impatient with the slowness of their physical growth and so marks on a door frame year by year can become a reference point, a sign of hope. Report cards from school indicate academic progress. Job evaluations can indicate progress on the job. It is when we look back over the year, or two years, or ten years that we are able to see how much we have grown.

It is the same with our growth in the Christian life. There are still moments when I lose my temper, become discouraged, frustrated, and am tempted to quit. Times when I wonder where God is. But when I look back over the years, remembering the way things used to be, remembering the way God has led me, I know that I am no longer the person I once was, but I also know I am not the person I am going to be. God has not finished with me yet. Then I can put my life back into focus, seeing it, if only for a moment, more the way God sees it, from the long-term view.

We need this long-term view as we seek to relate to our children. We need to learn how to idle our motors when we feel like stripping the gears. At times we expect too much of them, trying to push them into a maturity they are not ready for. At other times we fail to see the maturity that is already full-blown.

We need this long-term view if our democratic processes are going to have a chance to work. No society changes peacefully overnight. Ideas are slow to change. To force change provokes needless opposition. The harder you force the change, the more forceful becomes the opposition. We see the result in Eastern Europe and in China, in our own society and in the Church. The seeds of change have to be sown, the soil has to be cultivated, the seedlings fed and watered. Given proper care, many of the seeds take root and grow. In due time they will produce fruit according to the seed that has been sown. So, too, it takes time for a firm and abiding faith to develop in any heart and life. We cannot expect great changes because of one call, or one caring deed,

“Little drops of water, little grains of sand,
Make a mighty ocean and a pleasant land.”

It takes patience to be persistent in our calling and in our caring and in our seeking a more just society. Our doing, whether it be reaching out to another, or seeking changes in society or church, must be unconditional. That is to say, we need to do what God in Christ is calling us to do, lead the life God in Christ is calling us to live, regardless of whether anything changes.

CONCLUSION

Patience, then, comes as we allow the Spirit of God to live in and through us. This comes more easily when we discover that changing the world, changing society, changing people, is God's work. God is the One primarily responsible for change. Our task is to seek to do God's will today. That may be sowing the seed, doing some cultivating, feeding some young seedlings, seeking to provide the right environment, the right conditions under which change may take place. But it is God who will bring in the harvest. In other words, we do not run the Universe. God is in command. We are simply God's servants, God's stewards, entrusted by God with the care of all that God has created.

Paul said that love is patient. Perhaps that is the clue we need. As our love grows so will our patience. As we love God more, we will trust God more, allowing God to work things out according to His plan rather than trying to be one step ahead of God. As we love others more, we may be kinder in our judgement, more understanding, more willing to help them bear their burden, even though they may be unkind and unfeeling towards us. We will care patiently and unconditionally, allowing God's love to touch their lives.

Let us pray:

"Spirit of the living god, move among us all,
Make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love:
Humble, caring, selfless, sharing.
Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love!"

(Michael Baughen)

KINDNESS FOR THE UNDESERVING

Text: *"For he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked"*

Luke 6:35

INTRODUCTION

Showing kindness to the undeserving is a common theme that runs through both the Old and the New Testaments.

In our Old Testament reading this morning we heard the story of Naaman who was healed of leprosy. He was undeserving on two counts. Firstly he was not a Jew, therefore it was believed he had no standing before the God of Israel. Secondly, he was a leper which, to the people of the day, was a clear indication that he had sinned and was being punished. On both counts he was considered an untouchable, an outcaste. But despite the fact that he was undeserving, God chose to heal him. This was one of the stories that Jesus referred to in his sermon in Nazareth which resulted in a riot and an attempt to kill him.

Then there is the story of Saul who, on his way to Damascus to arrest any who followed the Christ, was confronted by a vision of Christ, as a result of which he was struck blind. He was led into the city by the hand. Ananias, the Christian leader in Damascus, was asked by God to go to Saul, lay his hands upon him, and heal him. Who among us would willingly reveal ourselves to the person who had come to destroy us?

Then there is the story told by William Sloan Coff in his book *"The Courage to Love"*:

"An old man in India sat down in the shade of an ancient banyan tree whose roots disappeared far away in a swamp. Presently he discerned a commotion where the roots entered the water. Concentrating his attention, he saw that a scorpion had become helplessly entangled in the roots. Pulling himself to his feet, he made his way carefully along the tops of the roots to the place where the scorpion was trapped. He reached down to extricate it. But each time he touched the scorpion, it lashed his hand with its tail, stinging him painfully. Finally his hand was so swollen he could no longer close his fingers, so he withdrew to the shade of the tree to wait for the swelling to go down. As he arrived at the trunk, he saw a young man standing above him on the road, laughing at him. 'You're a fool,' said the young man, 'wasting your time trying to help a scorpion that can only do you harm.' The old man replied, 'Simply because it is the nature of a scorpion to sting, should I change my nature which is to save?'"

Paul reminds us that kindness is one of the fruits of the spirit. While Jesus says in our New Testament reading that God is "kind to the ungrateful and the wicked".

a) A NATURAL RESPONSE?

While being kind to those who are kind to us may be a natural response in some people, being kind to the underserving is far from a natural response. Each of us would probably have a different definition of who the undeserving are. In fact it is also probable that there are times in all our lives when we find it difficult to be kind, even to those we love. I am sure we can all call to mind some occasion when we were anything but kind towards our spouses, our parents or our children. How do we respond when someone has wronged us, hurt our feelings, used us as a stepping stone, told untruths about us behind our backs, or persists in behaviour that is harmful to themselves and others? At least initially we can feel angry and vindictive. The cry for vengeance which we feel rising from the depths within us is as old as humanity. The Book of Genesis reports Lamech as saying,

“Adah and Zillah, listen to me, wives of Lamech, mark what I say: I kill a man for wounding me, a young man for a blow. Cain may be avenged seven times, but Lamech seventy-seven.”

There are countless similar cries throughout the Old Testament.

We hear the same cry in the modern world. In Ireland, a Catholic is killed in retaliation for the killing of a Protestant. The cry comes out of Palestine where Arab kills Jew and Jew kills Arab. Westerners are kidnapped, passenger aircraft blown up in the sky, bombs go off in crowded streets, all in the name of vengeance. Even in our own country there is a growing feeling that vengeance is fundamental to community safety. The call is for stiffer punishments for all offenders and the return of the death penalty for those who commit murder.

The coming of Jesus was supposed to lead us beyond the concept of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. While we no longer cut off the hand of the thief, or put out the eye of a peeping tom, or stone to death those who commit adultery, and we have come to the point of accepting as normal many things that were once punishable offences, nevertheless the person who has been punished for their crime still finds it extremely difficult to re-enter normal society. They are seldom treated kindly.

Vengeance, retaliation, is a common occurrence in some sports. Some hockey players are employed simply for that purpose. There was hope this was going to change with talk to ban fighting from the game. If they are ever successful, some of the most ardent fans will be very upset.

I suspect that the desire for vengeance, the desire to retaliate, is still very much a part of many peoples' thinking. In all of us there can arise, at least initially, the feeling of vengeance. The need to get even, to punish, to hurt the other as we have been hurt. I know I was surprised at my own reaction some time ago when I read an article in Maclean's on a co-ed prison in BC. As I looked at the picture in one of the cells – posters on the walls, counterpane on the bed, a

dresser against the wall – it looked like a normal young person’s bedroom, better than many. It looked too comfortable to be a prison cell. It did not seem right, just, or fair.

Should the wrongdoer be treated harshly or kindly? Does harsh treatment rehabilitate? Paul, writing to the Christians in Rome says, “If your enemy hungers, feed him, if he is thirsty give him a drink; by doing this you will heap live coals on his head. Do not let evil conquer you, but use good to defeat evil” (Romans 12:20-21). While Jesus tells us that God Himself, “is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.” If I am the object of God’s kindness that’s great. But if the object of God’s kindness is some undeserving character, is God being fair?

b) GOD’S RESPONSE

Does the context of our text bring us any clarity? It is set in a passage in which Jesus is advocating love for one’s enemies. He says:

“But love your enemies and do good, and lend expecting nothing in return, your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the most high, for He is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked.”

Today we live in a society in which we are often kinder to animals than we are to our fellow human beings. We don’t allow an animal to suffer needlessly, we put them out of their misery. We oppose any cruelty in the killing of animals for food for our table or for their fur. Cruelty to a domestic animal is a punishable offence.

Many of us grew up in a society in which kindness to the other members of one’s family was the expected norm. Yet we are discovering that most of the abuse we are hearing about today, whether physical, mental, sexual, or emotional, is committed by family members on family members. While kindness to those who are kind to us, kindness to our loved ones, ought to be relatively easy, obviously it is not.

Despite the fact that Jesus tells us that there is little merit in that kind of kindness, he assumes that the returning of a friendly smile, the return of a friendly greeting, the kindly act in response to a kindly act, to lend to someone you know will return what you lend with interest, should come naturally. Jesus, by saying that God goes beyond what is natural, implies that those who seek to follow him are called to go beyond what is natural, implies that those who seek to follow him are called to go beyond this level of kindness as well:

“only so can you be children of your heavenly father, who makes His sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends rain on the honest and the dishonest.” (Matthew 4:45)

Jesus is convinced that God is impartial in His kindness towards his creation. God is not one who plays favourites. Jesus does not point us to a vindictive God.

When James and John wished to call down fire from heaven to destroy an inhospitable village, Jesus rebuked them. Some Old Testament writers sensed this truth, but they interpret it as simply a with-holding of anger, of vengeance, for a while, giving God's children an opportunity to repent. But Jesus taught that, rather than holding back on His anger, God moves towards His children with an active goodwill. For Jesus spoke of the Good Shepherd who seeks the lamb that is lost. He spoke of the father who went to meet the son who had squandered his living in the far country. Paul and Barnabas in the Acts of the Apostles put it this way,

"In past ages He allowed all nations to go their own way; and He has not left you without some clue to His nature, in the kindness He shows."

And what was this kindness? "He sends the rain from heaven and crops in their season and gives you food and good cheer and plenty" (Acts 14:17). The belief in a God who supplies all our needs may be too simple a faith for our age, for we live in an age in which the emphasis is on being independent, and doing everything MY way. Which reminds me of the story of the minister who was playing in a golf tournament. As he approached the last hole he needed an eagle to win. It was a par four and his second shot sliced badly. Suddenly there was a clap of thunder, his ball hit a tree, then a fence, rolled through the sand trap and into the green and dropped into the hole for an eagle. The minister looked up and said, "Thank you, Father, but I would rather do it by myself."

But the truth of the matter is, none of us can live life independently. All our hopes and dreams of a better world depend upon the proper use of God's gifts which are all around us, including our minds and our hands. From the humblest labourer to the cleverest surgeon, each of us is dependent upon God for life and the ability to produce, whether we acknowledge it or not. Despite the fact that at times we are selfish, self-seeking, ungrateful, believing we can do as we please with what God has entrusted to us, God never withholds His kindness from us.

c) THE RESPONSE OF FAITH

How ought we to respond to God's loving kindness towards us? Is unconditional loving kindness towards the undeserving, even our enemies, humanly possible?

Peter Miller was a Christian who lived during the American Revolution. He had an enemy who hated him bitterly, and who had gone so far as to spit in Miller's face. Peter Miller bore the insult quietly with no attempt at revenge. During the war with Britain, Miller's enemy sided with the British and was said to have acted as a spy. He was caught and sentenced to hang. Miller, hearing what had happened, went to General Washington and pleaded for the man's life. Washington refused, claiming that severity was essential in time of war. Otherwise, he said, he would have cheerfully released his friend. "Friend," said Miller, "he's not my friend, he's the only enemy I've got." Washington was so impressed that he signed a pardon and Miller arrived just in time to save his enemy's life.

As Christians we are asked to treat our enemy with kindness, not because we hope to make a friend, but simply because that is the way God in Christ has treated us. As Paul reminds us, "For if when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son..." (Romans 5:10). It does not seem fair. Kindness towards the undeserving ought to have a special reward. But that was not the experience of Jesus. He spent his life acting with kindness to all whom he met. But few were changed. Of the ten lepers who were healed, only one returned to give thanks. Of the twelve, whom he called apostles, one betrayed him and the rest, when the chips were down, deserted him. His enemies crucified him.

Paul said, "Love is patient and kind." The two go together. It takes a special kind of patience to respond time and time again with kindness towards one who seeks to hurt you. That sort of situation bothers us, as it did Peter. He felt there ought to be a limit. "Lord," he said, "how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" And Jesus replies, "I do not say seven times but seventy times seven" (Matthew 18:21-22). In other words we are not to grow weary in our kindness, for the standard, the plumb line against which we are to measure our way of living, is not the community, or our neighbor, nor another family member, but God who, thank goodness, is never weary of being kind to us.

Being kind to the undeserving, like being kind to those who are kind to us, does not mean giving a person whatever they want or doing whatever they ask us to do. It is to do, as God does, whatever will enable the individual to achieve their full potential as a child of God.

CONCLUSION

Is such behaviour possible for us? On our own we have no chance. But Jesus said, "Bend your neck to my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble hearted and your souls will find release. For my yoke is easy, my load is light." The yoke was the piece of equipment used to link two animals together so that they could work together pulling a plough or some other implement. The word Jesus used for *easy* can also be translated to mean either kind, or well-fitting or good to bear. It refers to the yoke that fits well and therefore does not chafe and produce sores. With a well-fitted yoke the seemingly impossible burden becomes possible.

Yoked to Christ we can be empowered to do what alone we would be unable to do. As we seek to grow towards maturity in the Christian life, as we seek to be kind to the undeserving, we will need to be yoked with Christ. With Christ beside us, what seems like an impossible burden can be carried cheerfully because it was for this that we were created. With Christ beside us there is nothing that cannot be faced.

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

HOW TO BE GOOD THE EASY WAY

Text: *No athlete can win a prize unless he has kept the rules."*

2 Timothy 2:5

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps you are familiar with the couplet,

"Won't somebody give me some good advice
On how to be naughty and still be nice,"

which seems to reflect the attitude of many in our society today. We would like to have our cake and eat it too.

Augustine, many centuries ago, expressed a similar sentiment when he prayed, "Lord, make me pure, but not yet." As Christians we know we ought to be good, whatever that word means, but we're not convinced that being good is enjoyable. We would like to have a clear conscience, no more guilty feelings, but we also want to enjoy ourselves. Surely if a lot of people enjoy doing something, it can't be that bad, can it?

If you are an athlete and want to win a gold medal at the Olympics, your coach will lay out a training programme for you which must be strictly adhered to. The organizers of the games also have strict rules that must be complied with. Some athletes, seeking to get the edge on the competition, break the rules (as Ben Johnson did four years ago by taking a banned substance). But, as Paul reminded his young friend Timothy, "No athlete can win a prize unless he keeps the rules."

But our athletes are not alone in this. We live in an age when rules are being bent and broken by people in all areas of society. The crime is not in breaking the rules but in getting caught. The Law, whether it be civil law, church law, or moral law, and those who insist on upholding it are no longer honoured. This is especially true when any of these laws is seen to be interfering with what I want to do.

Our society is putting cleverness, that is, finding a loophole in the law, finding a way around the law, above goodness. Success is more important than sincerity. Achievement more important than integrity. A young lady said to a friend, "Mr Smith is a great man, he speaks eight languages." Her friend wisely replied, "Yes, he is a great man, but not because he speaks eight languages. He could be a liar in all eight."

It is so easy to get caught up in the chase after success as the world tends to see it, to gain the whole world, as Jesus said, but to lose your soul. Our Christian faith, while seeing life as a race to be run to the best of our ability, offers a different prize. Success for the Christian is the achievement of the kind of maturity we see in the life of Jesus. Goodness is one aspect of that maturity.

a) WHY BOTHER?

If being good does not ensure material security, that is a well-paying job, a comfortable home and a long enjoyable retirement, why bother? The temptations in the world today are very great. One young drug dealer was quoted as saying, "Why work for a hundred dollars a day when you can make \$12,000 a day selling coke?" For many, this is the question. Why be good when you can become a millionaire by being bad. Christian goodness doesn't have the same appeal. Just as good news doesn't sell newspapers.

Values, we are told, are changing. One must move with the times. There are no moral absolutes any more. As Christians we need to be concerned. Our society needs to see an alternative way of life. Real Christian goodness needs to be made visible. Some years ago, educators were so concerned about this issue that values education was introduced into the schools. Drug use, teen pregnancy, vandalism, violence between students and between student and teacher, has not been reduced.

The question for me has always been, can you separate a value system from a religious philosophy? If you do, on what are the values based? What is the philosophical system that supports them?

Values grow out of what one believes about life, about why we are here, and how we should relate to other people and to the world in which we live. But those are religious questions. Christianity preaches, "Blessed are those of a gentle spirit," "Blessed are those who know their need of God..." "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to see right prevail.." "How blessed are those who show mercy..." But deep down we still believe that it is the strong who will inherit the earth, it is the people with wealth who control our destiny. All the meek, those of a gentle spirit, get for their efforts is to be pushed around and used as stepping stones by those who are determined to get ahead.

Christian goodness is sheer sentimentality, all right perhaps in the home but both unworkable and impractical in the world of business and politics. Morality after all, more and more are saying, is a personal matter. I and only I decide what is morally right and wrong for me. Neither government, church, nor spouse, nor peer group can make that decision for me. Goodness is more often than not depicted as pallid, flat, uninteresting, while evil is seen to be glamorous, attractive, exciting enjoyable. The afternoon "soaps", according to one commentator, could not survive without the extra-marital affairs, the break-up of good marriages and the intrigue that goes with it. Are they really a reflection of our society, or has society become a reflection of the "soaps"?

Advertising uses a similar approach. Sex sells everything from beer to cars, including detergents. A movie restricted to adults only draws a bigger crowd than one rated for general family audiences. Some would say what they are seeing is just a continuation of the swing away from the more conservative society of many years ago, for which the church was somewhat responsible. Those were the days when Christians were seen as being soft, sissified, inhibited, self-righteous and deadly dull.

Being a Christian, living the Christian life, ought to be enjoyable. It ought to be fun. Real Christian goodness needs to be demonstrated so that our society may see what life with Christ is really like. That it is a good life.

b) CHRISTIAN GOODNESS – WHAT IS IT?

But what do we mean by goodness?

There was a day when it was seen in a negative sense. That is to say, a good Christian was one who did not smoke, did not drink, did not swear, did not dance, did not play cards, did not work on Sunday, did not covet, especially his neighbour's wife. The positive aspects were usually the unspoken assumptions that the good Christian attended church regularly, read the bible and prayed. A good Christian never complained, no matter how much they were imposed upon. They accepted authority without question.

But times have changed. Of course, we use the word good in every area of life. We like to buy a good car. We enjoy good food. We would like to see a good movie. But who decides which of all the cars on the market, is the good car? Or which of all the movies that are produced are the good movies? There is no common standard. So much depends upon personal taste. We may look for guidance from the movie critics and consumer guides but usually our final decision is made on personal preference.

Most of us have no difficulty accepting these differences. It is more difficult in the public domain. How do we decide on a good economic policy for the country, or a good immigration policy, or an abortion policy, or whether to have capital punishment, or what social programmes everybody should enjoy? What do we mean by good in the public domain?

Christian goodness is a biblical concept. In the New Testament there are two words which can be translated by our English word "good". There is *agathos*, which refers to the moral quality of anything. There is *kalos* which means goodness in the sense of attractive, winsome. The New Testament writers use *kalos* much more frequently than *agathos*. In other words, the good life we are called to live should be attractive, winsome, a life that draws others like honey draws bees or an outside light draws the moths.

Christian goodness is not confined to a certain moral code. A stranger came into town one Sunday morning looking for a church to attend. While standing outside one he heard the minister and congregation reading together, "We have left undone those things we ought to

have done, and we have done those things we ought not to have done..." He hesitated no longer, went inside and dropped into a seat, sighing, "Thank goodness, I've found my kind of people at last."

Contrary to popular opinion, Christian goodness does not mean moral perfection. We have all sinned and come short of the perfection of God. Our prayer of confession, Sunday by Sunday, is for all of us. Nevertheless there ought to be an attractiveness about our life in Christ, and our life as a congregation of Christ's people, that draws others in, even though we still struggle with the dark side of our nature which seeks to turn us away from God. Mark tells us of a young man who came to Jesus saying, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Good, here, means morally good. Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? No-one is good except God alone."

Moral goodness, Jesus believed, was not something anyone could claim for themselves. It was an aspect of God's life. God alone was morally good. Any seeming good we do is always connected to our relationship with God. Luke tells us of two men who were good. He says of Joseph of Arimathea, "a good and righteous man, looking for the kingdom of God..." This Joseph had been a member of the Council in Jerusalem who had condemned Jesus to death. It was this same Joseph who claimed the body of our Lord and provided the rock tomb. He had nothing to gain by doing what he did, and everything to lose. He was a man open to the truth. A willing instrument in the hands of God. Luke, years after the events, observed the fruit of this man's life and called him a good man.

Then there was Barnabas, a member of the priestly tribe of Levi. He was sent by the Church to Antioch to check on the genuineness of the Gentiles' conversion. He represented the wing of the Church who believed that Gentiles should first become Jews, accepting the Mosaic Law. Having lived with them for a while, he was convinced that their conversion was genuine and reported that God had indeed done something new. The law of Moses was not a prerequisite for Christian faith. Then one day the Church in Jerusalem is in financial difficulties. It was Barnabas who sold his property and brought the money to the Apostles. It was Barnabas who suggested the mission to the Gentiles and recruited Paul and accompanied Paul on his first missionary journey. Luke calls Barnabas a good man.

What do the lives of Jesus, Joseph and Barnabas tell us about Christian goodness? They were men of generosity, with a broadness of mind and an openness of heart that enabled them to accept people as persons where they were. They were able to seek the best in a person and in their ideas. They were willing to do what needed to be done at the moment, with little thought for personal consequences.

Surely the biblical picture is that Christian goodness appears, is to be seen, wherever and whenever a man or woman, boy or girl, allows God to live in and through them, not negatively, but positively. Their goodness is attractive, because something of God is seen in and through them.

c) HOW TO LIVE THE GOOD LIFE

Every day we are faced with such a variety of choices. Movies, music videos, magazines, interest groups, neighbours, friends, present us with a variety of lifestyles, a variety of views, as to what the good life is. We are torn between wanting to be in a good relationship to God so that we can enjoy life with God now and for ever, but at the same time we would like at least to taste some of those so-called forbidden pleasures. The tempter comes to us and says, "If so many are doing it, it can't be that bad. And if it is, isn't it God's job to forgive and forget?"

It is somewhat like the urge that comes to eat junk food. We know it is not good for us, but how much is harmful? If only we knew how much we could eat safely, so that we could quit in time. We know cigarette smoking can cause cancer. But how many cigarettes will give us lung cancer? Our best of chance of good health is to obey the laws of health. Eat a balanced diet, take adequate exercise, have sufficient sleep and, as far as in you lies, live at peace with all people. There are also rules to be followed for Christian goodness – forget self, follow a daily spiritual discipline, obey the laws of health and spend our lives on behalf of others. The good life does not come by making vows to try harder. The message of Jesus was not to try harder, to do better. Such a message is never good news.

We know our cars are made to run on a certain fuel, lead-free gasoline or propane or diesel. Without the right fuel in the tank our car will not go. So too our lives have been made in such a way that, without God, they are unable to function in the way they were intended to. Life still goes on but is not as fulfilling or as enjoyable as it could be. God came in Jesus Christ to show us, once and for all, what a human life lived in dependence upon God was like. This was the life we were created for.

Confusion, frustration, aimlessness, emptiness is the usual result of life that is lived with no reference to God. People seek some new Messiah, someone who has a short cut to a fuller and more abundant life that is lived with no reference to God. The result – four major wars in sixty years, the recent Gulf war, the current fighting in various African countries, starvation in the midst of plenty, the ever present threat of economic chaos in much of the world, and the continuing destruction of our environment.

Our society hears the words of Jesus and many dismiss him as an impractical idealist. But in the light of the current state of the world and society, who is the realist?

CONCLUSION

We reflect the chaos of the world in which we live.

Edward Morton wrote,

“Within my humble Temple there’s a crowd
There’s one that’s humble, one that’s proud
There’s one that’s broken-hearted for his sins
There’s one that unrepentant sits and grins.

There’s one that loves his neighbour as himself
And one who cares for nought but fame and self
From much corroding care I should be free
If I should once determine which is me.”

Society today is like a symphony orchestra that is preparing for a concert. Each member tunes his or her instrument independently. What a racket, it sounds chaotic. There is only discord, disunity and confusion. What is needed for great music to be heard? The conductor. He or she raps the podium with the baton. Silence falls. The conductor raises the baton and, together, the various members play the variety of instruments and translate the black notes on the piece of paper into sounds that inspire.

How can we be good the easy way? How can we live the good life, the Christian life? By coming under the discipline of the Master conductor, getting our life in step with His beat.

FAITHFULNESS

Text: *“Well done, my good and trusty servant,” said the Master, “You have proved Trustworthy in a small way; I will now put you in charge of something big.”*
Matthew 25:21

INTRODUCTION

A little paragraph once appeared in a newspaper. It wasn't deemed important enough to have a heading in heavy type all to itself. It reported a railroad engineer who had retired after 50 years of service. When thanking his workmates for their gift he mentioned that in those fifty years he had travelled a million miles. That is the equivalent of 41 trips around the world, or two trips to the moon with several thousand miles left over. Imagine all the places he must have visited, all the sights he must have seen, all the different scenery. Think of the thousands of passengers whom he carried safely as they travelled across the country. What an exciting life! At least that is what I used to think when I was a boy and dreamt of being an engine driver on the railroad.

But in reality, this particular engine driver had never driven his engine beyond the town limits. He had travelled a million miles to nowhere. For fifty years he had driven a shunting engine. He had spent his life back and forth in the railway yard, shunting cars of grain, coal, oil, raw materials and manufactured goods, making sure that each car was in the right place at the right time. Not very glamorous. Not very exciting. Even somewhat monotonous and boring. At the same time, an essential service. If such a driver does not do his job faithfully, we would soon find shortages in stores, and in industries, which are essential to our daily life.

There are many jobs like that. Our society could not operate without the faithful service of a multitude whose work is seldom given recognition. Faithfulness is also one of the qualities of the Christian life, a gift of the Holy Spirit. As Christians we are called to be faithful because God is faithful.

a) THE FAITHFULNESS OF GOD

The book of Deuteronomy tells us,

“Know then that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. He keeps covenant and faith for a thousand generations.” (Deuteronomy 7:9)

The prophet Isaiah tells us,

“Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and His holy One, the one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the servant of rulers: Kings shall see and arise;

princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the Lord, who is faithful.. “
(Isaiah 49:7)

Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says, “God is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9).

Over and over again the Bible speaks of God as the One who is faithful, the One in whom people can trust because God’s Word is true. God is not one who is forever changing His mind.

The universe God has created operates according to predictable laws. The planets follow a precise and predictable course. The sun always rises, and the seasons come and go in the prescribed order. The feelings of insecurity many suffer from should not be blamed on God. Our insecurity comes from unstable human relationships. We allow our moods to dictate our attitude toward life, our attitude to our children, our attitude towards others.

One day we can snap at our children, our spouse, our neighbour over some action that another day would cause us to smile. Inconsistency in the home, on the playing fields, in the community, leads to a feeling of insecurity. But that is not the way God is. God is not changeable. God can be trusted. God is faithful. God keeps his promises.

The history of Israel is in part an account of the promises of God and their fulfilment. God promised Abraham a new nation and a new land. God promised Moses release for the children of Israel held as slaves by the Egyptians. Through the mouths of the prophets God promised a special leader, the Messiah, who would re-establish the original kingdom, one in which God was King.

God promised life to all who believed in Him. God promised forgiveness to all who truly repented and turned to Him. Jonah was called by God to preach to the people of Ninevah. Reluctantly he did and the people repented and God did not destroy them. The promises of God are not empty promises.

The Bible speaks clearly of God’s faithfulness, but also of the people’s unfaithfulness. When Moses led the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt it was the people who grumbled and wished to return to the security of slavery. While Moses was receiving the law from God, it was the people who made a golden calf and chose to bow down to it. When Moses urged the people to enter the Promised Land, it was the people who were afraid because their spies had reported that there were giants in the land. It was the people who stoned and killed the prophets of God. But God never let his people go. As Christians we are to be faithful because God is faithful.

b) THE FAITHFULNESS OF JESUS

It would be easy for us to respond by saying, “But God is God. We are not God. How can God expect us to be faithful as He is faithful?” And so God chose to come among us in the person of

Jesus. Jesus was fully human as we are, and was able to reflect the faithfulness of God in his life and teaching. Therefore it is possible for us to live faithful lives.

As a boy, Jesus accompanied his parents to Jerusalem. There he spoke with the elders of Israel. But when his parents came looking for him, he returned with them to his home in Nazareth. We are told he continued to grow in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man. Tradition has claimed that, on the death of Joseph, Jesus continued to work in the carpenter's shop, supporting his mother and his brothers and sisters. That is to say, he faithfully fulfilled the duties of the eldest son.

In the light of his calling to be the Messiah, some may feel this to be a misplaced faithfulness. Shouldn't he have been busy preaching, teaching and healing, rather than supporting the family? I believe that these were essential years of preparation. As he himself said, "He that is faithful in very little is faithful in much" (Luke 16:10). And so in God's good time, Jesus is entrusted with his mission to be Saviour of the world. At his baptism God said, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased."

His teaching is permeated with the lessons he had learned through those years of preparation. He had learned the foolishness of putting new wine in old wine skins, the short-sightedness of sewing a new piece of cloth into an old garment. He knew how important it was for a yoke to fit perfectly. He knew that while it took extra work to build the foundation of a house on the rock rather than on the sand, it was worth it in the long run. He knew that once a man started down the field with the plough, he could not cut a straight furrow if he was forever looking back. Jesus had learned in the school of daily living the importance of being faithful to the task one has been given.

And so it was when the call of God came, Jesus was able to leave his home and the carpenter's shop and pick up the task God had chosen him for, the restoration of humanity to a right relationship with God. Once having set his eye on that goal, he never turned back, no matter how dark the future looked. As the opposition gathered, he set his face to go to Jerusalem, the very heart of opposition. Despite the pleas of family, friends and disciples, who sought to prevent him from walking into the lion's den, he persisted. Jesus faithfully carried out the task for which God had called him.

c) FAITHFULNESS, A REQUIREMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Because God is faithful, and because of the faithfulness of Jesus our Lord and Master, faithfulness is an aspect of the Christian life. While it is a gift of the spirit, it is not a quality that appears miraculously when we say yes to Christ. However, having set our feet on the path of discipleship, we will grow in the Christian life and in due time we will become the faithful people on whom God can count to do His will.

In the parable of the talents, those who put their talents to work so they doubled in size, were commended and rewarded with greater responsibilities. "Well done, good and faithful

servant, you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21). It ought to be safe to assume that, if a person is a Christian then that person can be trusted, they will be faithful, they will do what they say they will do. This is true for the majority, and I thank God for that fact. The Church could not survive if this were not so.

How long would a congregation survive without the faithful service of choir members, organist, youth leaders, Sunday School teachers, the UCW, those who serve on committees and the Church Board, those who keep things clean and tidy, those who visit the sick, the newcomer, the shut-in, and all who worship faithfully Sunday by Sunday? The Church of Christ depends upon the multitude of faithful believers who carry on day in and day out without losing heart or seeking any reward. Which calls to mind the story first told by Harold Phillips in his Yale lectures on preaching.

“A minister once recognized as the most regular attender at the worship service a hard-working washerwoman who, Sunday after Sunday, was observed in her pew. He wanted to find the reason for such fidelity and so asked, ‘Perhaps you enjoy my sermons?’
‘Na, it’s no’ that.’
‘Then what brings you here every week?’
‘Well it’s like this. I work hard a’ week and it’s no’ often I get sic a comfortable sate with sae little tae think about.’”

Such stories help to keep we preachers humble!

As we seek to serve faithfully, we all experience moments of doubt, moments when we feel like quitting because there doesn’t seem much point in going on. Our trust has been betrayed. A fellow Christian lets us down. Those who see things differently seem to be getting their way. There has been so much bad news that we can’t help wondering if the world is beyond help. At such times we need to remind ourselves that our God is faithful. Our God will use the faithfulness of His people to carry out His purposes in the world.

As Christians we are called to live faithfully not only within the church but at home, in the community, and in our work. We are called to be faithful in good times and in the not so good. As we share life with those who are going through a rough time, we can learn from one another. As we see the strength they receive from God to meet their need, so we learn that the promises of God are not in vain. Our God is faithful. We discover that our God does not test us beyond our ability, and with the test God provides the strength to see us through.

But if faithfulness grows in us, what enables that to happen? Faithfulness grows through our life with God in Christ. The great saints of Christian history have found that worship, the sacraments, prayer and bible study enable the life of faith to grow. That is, we need to spend time on the inward journey. In busy lives that requires a discipline. If we do not make the time for the inward journey, then is it surprising that when the crisis comes, God does not seem close? We need to tune in on God on a regular basis.

Family devotions with young children may not be easy, though mealtime or bedtime rituals can be established which can introduce children to the God who is always with us. Talking with God can become as natural as talking with our spouse or best friend. While one side of faithfulness grows through the practice of a spiritual discipline, there is also the practical side of faithfulness, that is, the living of faith in the midst of life.

An old Scotsman was operating a small rowboat for transporting passengers across one of the smaller lochs in Scotland. One day a passenger noticed that he had carved on one oar, “faith”, and on the other “works”. Curiosity led him to ask the meaning of this. The old man said, “I will show you.” He dropped the one oar and began to ply the one marked “faith”, and the boat went round in circles. Then he dropped that oar and took up the one marked “works”, and once again the boat went round in circles. Then he picked up both oars and plied them together and the boat sped swiftly over the water. He said to his passenger, “You see that is the way it is in life, as well as in the boat.” (*Canadian Churchman*).

The faithful Christian life requires both the inner journey and the outward journey. We are to be faithful in thought, word and deed. As Christians we are to be faithful in every aspect of life. Young people are to be faithful in school, developing the gifts they have been given. At home we are to fulfil our responsibilities faithfully to one another. At work we faithfully do the tasks assigned to us no matter how humble, no matter how important. We are to be the kind of people of whom others can say, “You can always count on them. You can trust them. They will never let you down.”

CONCLUSION

If you become bored with the Christian life, if the daily routine seems monotonous, remember, the sun rises every morning – how monotonous, yet how dependable. Without such dependability we could not live. Spring follows winter, summer always comes after spring, some years not as warm as others, and some wetter than others. But the seasons come and go in a monotonous dependability. Faithfulness, dependability, trustworthiness, are sometimes rewarded by greater responsibility, but not always. Most of the time it is not recognized. Most of us carry on in relative obscurity, but our faithful service is an invaluable part of the whole picture. Howard Arnold Walter wrote:

“I would be true, for there are those who trust me
I would be pure, for there are those who care
I would be strong for there is much to suffer
I would be brave for there is much to dare.”

As Christians, as we seek to grow in faithfulness, we know that there is One who always cares. Our God is faithful and calls us to be faithful.

THE GIFT OF GENTLENESS

Text: *"I am gentle and humble hearted."*

Matthew 11:29

INTRODUCTION

There's a children's hymn in the old blue book which many of us learned at a very early age and which I am sure influenced the way we thought about Jesus and the living of our faith for some time. It was written by Charles Wesley:

"Gentle Jesus, meek and mild
Look upon a little child
Thou art gentle, meek and mild
Thou wast once a little child."

As you once again hear those familiar words, what is the picture that comes to mind? Do you picture a rather delicate person, easily pushed around, bowing and scraping before all and sundry, never raising his voice, a bit of a waffler, changing direction with change of the wind? How many children would really want to be like him? When we are growing up, how many of us modelled our lives after that picture?

The Gospel writers paint quite a different picture. They tell us that Jesus was a carpenter, often employed in general construction. He would build houses as well as yokes. There would be times when he was required to be a one-man construction company. Not a job for a delicate person. No job for a weakling.

The Gospel writers tell us of his travels, always on foot, back and forth across the countryside. While there may have been the occasional Roman road, most of the time he would walk the narrow country footpaths, through farmers' fields, over the hills and mountains, and beside streams and rivers. He lived off the land, often spending nights in the open air. Such travelling would require a strong, healthy body, with a stamina above the average.

Our Gospel reader this morning told the familiar story of the cleansing of the Temple. Seeing the court of the Gentiles taken over by the merchants and the money changers, the Gentiles' place of prayer desecrated, Jesus took a whip and drove the desecraters out. Is that the sort of action we expect of a gentle man? Despite criticism and plots against his life he persisted in associating with the social outcasts, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the drunks. He was not afraid of being labeled by the company he kept. Hardly the actions of a waffler, one who changed his views every time the wind changed direction.

The picture Wesley painted and the picture painted by the Gospel writers seem contradictory. But Jesus himself said, "I am gentle and humble hearted." The apparent contradiction is the result of translation and our tendency to limit the meaning of a word. Our word *gentle* has a number of different meanings, from the right to bear arms, being honourable, generous, courteous, but also tame, quiet, easily managed, not stormy. The same is true of the Geek word used in this verse. It has three possible meanings, each of which is important if we are going to get a true picture of the gentleness of Jesus, the gentleness which is a gift of the spirit.

a) GENTLENESS... ANGER AT THE RIGHT TIME

For the Greeks, gentleness was the mean between two extremes. On the one hand was excessive anger, and at the other end of the scale was the absence of all anger. Thus, for the Greeks, the gentle person was not the one who never got angry, but rather the one who knew the right time to be angry, and was angry for the right reasons. This means that Gentleness as the gift of the Spirit is not to be totally devoid of anger, but rather to know when to be angry and over what issues. If Jesus is our guide, then his cleansing of the Temple and his display of anger which accompanied that act, was his response to the misuse, the desecration of the Court of the Gentiles, their place of prayer. In other words the right of the Gentiles to a place of prayer was being denied in the name of economic gain for the Temple authorities.

Jesus, as a Jew, had the right to go into the inner court, the Court of the Jews. There he would find peace and quiet, a place of prayer. But to have passed through the bedlam of the court of the Gentiles and done nothing would have been to turn a blind eye to an unjust situation, an injustice being done to others.

When Jesus was called a wine bibber, a Sabbath breaker, when he was accused of being in league with Satan, there is no evidence in the Gospel story to indicate that this made Jesus angry. When we hear of a friend being accused of acting from ulterior motives or of being two-faced, that is, not being what they appear to be or having a forked tongue, what do we say? Do we remain silent, thus agreeing with the accusers? Or do we spring to our friend's defence? Do we seek to protect his or her honour? But when the accusations are directed at us personally, how do we react? How much passion is aroused in us when we see or hear about injustice in our community or nation, whether it be the Japanese being evacuated from the West Coast during the Second World War, or the attempt to expropriate aboriginal land to extend a golf course, or the deportation of illegal immigrants to their homeland where they will be persecuted and possibly killed. If the powers that be did any of those things to us personally, how would we feel? What passions would arise within us?

Jesus was a gentle man because he only became angry over injustice done to others, never over injustice done to himself. His anger on such occasions enabled him to seek to rectify the injustice.

b) GENTLENESS... THE LIFE CONTROLLED

Then the Greeks used the same word when they spoke of the domestication of animals. The gentle animal was the one trained to obey the word of command. The animal had learned to accept control. Therefore, Jesus, the gentle man, was seen to be such because his life was controlled by God. He was God's man, therefore a gentle man.

There is a great deal of evidence in the Gospel stories that this was true. As a boy in the Temple he became so engrossed with the Teachers of Israel that he failed to rejoin his parents when they were ready to leave. His excuse was that he was about his father's business.

Following his baptism in the Jordan, he spent forty days and forty nights in the desert. There he struggled with God's will for his life. God had entrusted him with a mission, but how was it to be accomplished?

When his disciples asked him to teach them to pray, the prayer he taught them included the phrase, "Thy will be done..".

His last night on earth was spent in prayer. It was a night of struggle. Knowing what lay ahead, Jesus wanted to be sure that it was God's will. "If it be possible let this cup pass from me. But not my will but Thine be done." Jesus had learned to be obedient to the will of God. His life was controlled by God. He did not do his own will but the will of the One who had sent him. Jesus' life was under the control of God, therefore he was a gentle man.

As Jesus struggled with this issue of control, so do we. Independence is highly prized today. All our lives we struggle to be free from every sort of authority. In our teen years we seek to be free from parental authority we want to make our own decisions, we want to be independent of not only parents and relatives but all authority figures. But as we grow in stature and wisdom we discover that we are never completely free. Of course there are those who never acknowledge that reality and so live their lives in a constant state of rebellion.

Christians have discovered that absolute freedom doesn't exist, neither does absolute independence. To overthrow one power, is to find oneself face to face with another. One may free oneself from one set of chains only to find that in the process we have accepted another set of chains. Are the people of Russia or Yugoslavia experiencing absolute freedom? Communism may be finished but is their current situation that much of an improvement? Even we, who live in the so-called free world, do not enjoy absolute freedom. Real freedom comes when we decide to accept certain limitations. Within those limitations we enjoy a certain amount of freedom. Real freedom comes when we decide whom we will serve, not because we have to but because we want to serve.

When George Matheson discovered this, he wrote:

“Make me a captive Lord
And then I shall be free
Force me to render up my sword
And I shall conqueror be

My will is not mine own
Till Thou hast made it Thine
If it would reach a monarch’s throne
It must its crown resign.”

Every human being serves someone or something. We may commit our lives to the service of a political cause, or an economic cause, an athletic goal, an academic goal, or simply personal pleasure. So that the real question is not freedom from control, but who or what have I allowed to control my life?

Jesus willingly surrendered his life to God, he let go and let God, and out of that surrender became the gentle man that he was.

c) GENTLENESS... THE WILLINGNESS TO ACKNOWLEDGE OUR NEED

The Greeks also used this same word to mean a person’s ability to acknowledge their own weakness and their need. These are the very qualities any one of us needs in order to let go and let God. In order to be yoked with Christ and learn from him. We have to be able to acknowledge our need for such a partnership in life. If we think we know it all, Jesus has nothing to teach us. If we think we are whole, we have no need of his healing. It is only the person who knows they are sick who seeks the doctor. Jesus’ ministry was to sinners, those who knew their need. He could not minister to the righteous, because they believed they had no need.

There is a story told of some Oxford Dons who were composing a letter inviting Queen Victoria to visit their college. They began by saying, “Conscious as we are of our shortcomings..” A sarcastic colleague suggested that it would be more accurate to say, “Conscious as we are of one another’s shortcomings..”

Times have not changed. Most of us find it easier to see the faults in others rather than in ourselves. Others always appear more ignorant than we do. The weaknesses of others are always more glaring than our own. Sermons are speaking to someone else. Prayers of Confession are talking about someone else’s sins. Knowing this, Jesus with a twinkle in his eye no doubt, once said, “Why do you try taking the spot of dirt out of your brother’s eye, while you have a log in your own eye?” What a picture! How his hearers must have chuckled.

We tend to be so much harsher in our view of the wrong done by others. James Taylor, in his little book *An Every Day God*, has a passage titled, "In the family way." In it he suggests that the Christian way of looking at right and wrong should not be from the basis of absolute principles, to be obeyed or broken, but from the family point of view. The prodigal son is welcomed home, the fatted calf is killed, there is a new robe and shoes and a ring for his finger, no talk of punishment. Russel Griddle, in his book *Love is Blind*, writes"

"People, like mothers, who instinctively react with love, are the meek. The person who is too weak to love when it hurts thinks that meek people are afraid. They are in a way, but they are afraid of hating. It is easier to hate, sometimes, than to love and meek people have to be strong. People who are not meek stop loving when it hurts."

The acknowledgement of personal need and the reaching out to another can be the beginning of an in-depth human relationship, and an in-depth relationship with God.

The Christian life, the life of faith, has its beginning when we admit our inability to live life on our own resources, and we reach out to a God who can meet our every need. As long as we believe that we can handle life alone, that there is no experience we cannot cope with, we remain proud and irreligious, and we live in a state of rebellion against God, determined like children, to do our own thing come hell or high water.

Real maturity comes when we realize that we have our limitations. We are not God. As we come to know Jesus, we discover a fully mature human being, yet one who never claimed to have all the answers. He never claimed to be God, only to point to God. He never claimed to speak on his own authority, but always on the authority of the One who had sent him. He believed in showing the way. On the night in which he was betrayed, he took the towel and the bowl and washed his disciples' feet. A task most of us would find far from easy. We hesitate to get involved. We are afraid we may be asked to do more than our share. We don't want to be imposed upon. We don't want to be walked over. We have done our bit in the past, now it ought to be someone else's turn. We hesitate to speak to that person in front of us, behind us, or beside us. It is embarrassing to admit that, though we have seen them many times, we don't know who they are. Or we may never have seen them before, but they may have sat in some other part of the church, they may be long-time members.

We feel self-conscious in the serving role. But Jesus took the bowl and the towel. He accepted the servant role. He acknowledged his need of God. He rose early for prayer. He stayed late in the mountains for prayer. While his Disciples slept he kept in touch with the source of his strength. He had found that God, the God who had called him from the carpenter's shop, the God who had entrusted the mission of reconciliation to him, met all his needs. Therefore this Jesus can lead us to that place where our needs can be met.

CONCLUSION

Jesus was a gentle man. But he was not weak or wishy-washy. He was strong physically, psychologically, mentally and emotionally. We too need this same kind of strength if we are to walk in his footsteps.

One day there was a dispute among the Christians in the Corinthian congregation and the issue was taken to the civil court. Paul tells them they were wrong to do this. It is better, he says, to suffer wrong and be defrauded, than to take a fellow Christian to court. In our eagerness for personal justice, we may win an argument but lose our brother or sister.

Jesus, the gentle man, calls us to stop thinking in terms of our rights and to think instead of the rights of others. We are to take the wrong done to us in our stride, becoming concerned about the wrong done to others. Our calling is to demonstrate in our living that, in Christ, we have found a new and living way. The spirit's gift of gentleness will enable us to follow our Master in such a way that others may be influenced to do likewise. But if we do not show something of the gifts of the spirit through our living, how can others find and experience Christ's way of living and loving?

THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

SELF-CONTROL

Text: *Every athlete exercises self-control in all things."*

1 Corinthians 9:25

INTRODUCTION

The years of preparation by thousands of athletes from practically every nation on the face of the earth came to its climax a few weeks ago when the Olympic Games were held in Barcelona. For those who won gold medals, they are now enjoying the financial rewards of their dedication. But for the rest and the many who didn't make it to the games, there is the satisfaction of knowing that they did their best.

Now we are more aware than ever of the tremendous pressure placed on our athletes to win and, therefore, the temptation to use drugs of some sort to enhance one's performance to be a winner.

Already a new crop of budding Olympic competitors are in training. I admire the discipline of these young people. I admire their dedication which enables them to give countless hours, day after day, week after week, to improve their skills in the hope of making the national team. There is a rigid programme of diet, exercise and rest, to build the skills and the stamina they will require. For those who want to compete at that level, life must be focussed on the one goal, their whole life focussed on the one purpose. There is little time for anything else.

Paul, writing to the Christian congregation in Corinth, Greece, the birth place of the Olympic Games, suggests a similar dedication to the life God in Christ is calling them to live. I wonder what would happen if a Christian congregation today was composed of people with a similar dedication, a similar single-mindedness? Paul pictured life as being lived out on the playing surface of a stadium. The athletes are those called by God to be members of the body of Christ. The prize, according to Paul, is not a wreath of leaves that soon withers in the sun but a deep and abiding relationship with God our creator and nurturer. That being the prize, this is the most important contest there is. So Paul reminds us that just as, "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things, so too must the disciple of Christ." That is, the body with its emotions and appetites must be harnessed to the fulfilment of the one purpose. This ability to control self is one of the fruits of the spirit, one that is sorely needed if we would live the Christian life in the world today.

a) WHY?

Why is this so? Because we live in a society in which self-indulgence is rapidly becoming the norm rather than the exception. More and more are doing their own thing, going their own way, recognizing no authority but self. Our inclination is to do only what we feel like doing. That is, the body, its emotions and appetites, are in control. Eating and drinking to excess is common. Our society sees sexual desire as just another appetite to be satisfied on demand like any other hunger. And it has become socially accepted that such a hunger can be satisfied with any consenting adult, willingness being the only criteria. The fears that once held promiscuity in check are no more. Social diseases can be controlled by drugs. Unwanted pregnancies can be aborted. As for Aids, use a condom. Abstinence as an option is only a whispered possibility.

It is interesting that the September *Readers Digest* carries a reprint of an article from *USA Weekend* magazine on the Chastity Revolution. Since Magic Johnson disclosed he is infected with HIV virus, chastity may be becoming more acceptable. If this be so, it will be a welcome change from the view held even by some clergy that we have no right to insist on chastity for anyone. After all sexual activity is a human right to be protected at all costs so that participants can indulge themselves without fear. This was called by some an important advance in human relations. But it was also the attitude of Roman society which Paul and the early church faced and opposed vigorously.

Christians in New Testament times were led by the Spirit to set up a moral standard, a lifestyle different from the society that surrounded them. They believed that it was important for their bodies to be controlled by the mind and spirit of Christ, for Christ lived in and through them. But in our society it is not only our sexual appetite that has been given its freedom. Many have difficulty controlling their eating and drinking, their smoking and gambling. Most people today do not consider any of these things wrong. They may be bad for one's health or one's pocket book, but how can they be sinful when they are legal? But for the followers of Christ, it is not a question of legality. Rather, we believe that life is a gift from God. Life is to be lived for God, and the body is, in Paul's terminology, the "Temple of the Holy Spirit". That is to say, if Christ lives in and through us, we should avoid anything that takes Christ from the centre or interferes with our being the hands and feet of Christ today.

When emotions are not in control, prejudice rears its ugly head. Prejudice seems to be on the rise today. Ethnic violence is running rampant in parts of Europe. Old hatreds are being revived. Anti-Semitism is once again rearing its ugly head. We have the growth of anti-French sentiments in some parts of our country. There is a growing resentment against the restlessness of aboriginal people who are becoming more and more violent in their agitation for their rights. Rightly or wrongly, blacks in our large cities are feeling oppressed by authority and forced to survive on the crumbs from the white man's table. We have difficulty understanding why there is increasing violence from the poor and unemployed, many of whom belong to minority racial groups, though not all. For poverty and unemployment today has less to do with race than ever before.

Our problem may be that we don't live where they live. It is difficult to put ourselves into their shoes. Martin Luther King Jr, through speaking of his own people's experience, reflects to some degree the experience of many minority groups. He says,

"I guess it's easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say wait. But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will, and drown your brothers and sisters at whim, when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity, when you have seen the vast majority of your twenty million negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society, when your first name is nigger and your middle name becomes boy, no matter how old you are, when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobody-ness – then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait."

History reminds us that minority groups have been badly treated for centuries. The injustices done to them have been festering, generation after generation. The amazing thing is not that there is violence but there has been so little. When hope for a better future dies, self-control breaks down in some areas of our North American society; the dream of a more just society is dying, if not already dead. Increasingly Christian self-control is going to be needed if anarchy is to be avoided.

Christian self-control is not the spouting of pious platitudes in the face of injustice, but the control of the emotions, the prejudices, so that wrongs can be put right and God's justice brought into being.

b) SIGNS OF HOPE

I may have painted an overly dark view of our current situation. But it is a view the media seems to favour. But, like so many things in life, self-control and self-indulgence ebb and flow. The problems may seem immense but there are signs of hope. Parents and teens have organized in their fight against drunk driving. Most teens are not self-indulgent or lacking in values. They may not attend church as much as we would like, but many are actively concerned about the environment, about prisoners of conscience, about the alleviation of hunger and helping people in developing countries to help themselves. We have a number of organisations in the community seeking to make life better, from Helping Hands to the Sharing Place, including Service Clubs, Telecare, Hospice Orillia, Suicide Prevention, and so on. They all have two common problems, a shortage of money, and a shortage of volunteers.

But they are there, signs of hope. The government's push for *Participaction* has worked. More Canadians are exercising than ever before, which we hope will lead to better health. An attempt has been made to stem the violence in hockey, though the violence on TV seems to be running rampant. We may have a new Constitution and the resolution of outstanding land claims with our Native people, claims that have been under discussion for from 50 to 100 years. I am sure most of us would have lost our self-control long since. Habitat is a worthwhile

attempt to solve the problem of low income housing, enabling those who need such housing to build their own. This year garden plots were organized for those drawing food from the Barrie food bank, another way of helping them to become more independent.

These are all signs of hope. But the pendulum can so easily swing the other way. The fall of Communism in the USSR was seen as a sign of hope. But ethnic violence seems unstoppable. State control has been replaced with self-indulgence, pent up emotions have been set free. The old prejudices are in control.

While there are signs of hope in the world, many of us have difficulty with this particular gift of the Spirit in our personal lives. While children may stamp their feet, and throw a temper tantrum when they don't get their own way, we adults have our own way of doing the same thing. We may use the silent treatment. We may say things that we know will hurt. Some drive too fast. Some eat too much. Some slam the door. Some find it difficult to set priorities when it comes to the use of their time, talents and resources. The signs of hope are tentative. The persuasive voices of self-indulgence are hard to silence.

c) ACHIEVING SELF-CONTROL.. HOW?

How can we achieve this goal of self-control? While it is important to recognize the value of the goal, we need to remember that from the Christian point of view, it is a gift of the Spirit, one of the fruits of the Spirit's presence. Therefore, to achieve the goal, we need to cultivate the Spirit's presence. Paul uses the analogy of the athlete. Just as the serious athlete must enter serious training if he or she wishes to compete, so too must the Christian.

The spiritual life, the development of our relationship with God in Christ, does not happen by wishful thinking. Paul's analogy is intended as a guide. There were some in the early church who took a fanatical approach to the disciplining of the body. Anthony, who lived in 250 A.D. gave away all his possessions and lived on a diet of bread, water and salt. He fasted two to four days at a time and slept on the bare ground. He lived alone in a cave for 20 years. His contemporaries believed him to be a deeply spiritual man and he was in demand for spiritual advice. Simon Stylites was called the pillar saint because he lived on the top of a pillar for 36 years. These extremists were called "athletes of God". Even Martin Luther, the founder of the reformation, went through a period in his life when he sought mastery over his body through fasting, self-inflicted beatings and hours on his knees, none of which made him feel acceptable to God. Luther discovered that he was saved by Grace, the free gift of God. He had simply to let go and let God take command of his life. Only then did his bodily appetites come under control. He still needed a discipline, but it was of a different kind.

Jesus was not an extremist. He did not fast. He did not punish his body. The spirit of God was in control. His secret lay in his time apart, in his nurturing of his spiritual life. But the nurturing of the spiritual life, the development of self-control, is not an end in itself.

Paul disciplined his own body, so that he could be of greater service to his Lord. The control of our body is to enable us to run the race of life with our eye fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. If we would love God with all our heart, mind and strength then there is no room for self-indulgence.

Once again Jesus is our model, the one to keep our eye on. As prayer was a priority in Jesus' life, so it should be for the disciple. Prayer... that is, spending time recalling all the blessings God has showered upon us, filling our minds with positive thoughts, seeing the best in others. The inner life can be deepened through the reading of the Scriptures, especially when we seek to apply them in practical ways to our own life. Reading of or hearing directly of the experience of others can also help. But whatever method we use to deepen our spiritual life, the result should be increasing action.

Our ability to love and to care needs to be exercised or the spirit stagnates. The maintenance of a spiritual discipline is not easy. We often begin with good intentions, but other activities tend to crowd in. A personal discipline of prayer, study and service can often be sustained more effectively when our commitment to such a discipline is made in the context of some fellowship group, the members of which can keep us honest. Like Weight Watchers, accountability to someone or some group, can help.

CONCLUSION

I know that the discipline of the army or an athletic team can be a real bore to some. Soldiers try to escape it by going AWOL. Athletes break training. Both soldier and athlete are disciplined for such actions. The dedicated athlete or soldier knows that the training programme, though boring in some of its repetitiveness, nevertheless is preparing them to fight the war, or run in peace, in such a way that they will not let the team down. While the dedicated soldier or athlete may grumble at times, they stick to it, knowing the outcome will be determined by the effort they have put into their training.

As we seek to live the Christian life, our responsibility is far greater than any soldier or athlete. Our calling is not to serve the nation in time of war or on a UN mission, nor is our calling to bring fame to the nation by winning an Olympic gold medal. We have been called to serve the Lord of History. We have been called to share in Christ's ministry of reconciliation, to be co-workers with Christ. Our commitment, our dedication, our single-mindedness, and our training are of the utmost importance.

To allow our life to be guided by the spirit, to be able to keep our eye fixed on Jesus, to become the mature person like unto Christ, calls for the gift of self-control. Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine he must leave self behind, he must take up his cross and come with me." While Paul reminds us, "Every athlete goes into strict training. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things."